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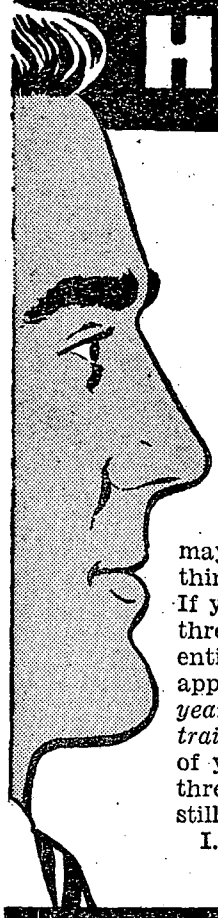

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August, 1949 Volume 11, Number 1

ideal Love

Marie Antoinette Park, Editor

Complete Book-Length Novel

(First Magazine Publication)

HALF WAY TO HEARTBREAK — Gail Sherman — 6

Love versus money . . . While jealousy, hatred and flaming love grew among four young people, one of whom was to be chosen to inherit a million dollars.

plus

EASY TO TAKE . . . . . Ann Mason — 62

"If you love me," Polly begged, "leave me alone. Go back to New York."

BAD LUCK GROOM — Celia Lockwood — 75

But Ann was to be only a rehearsal bride.

I'LL MARRY YOU TOMORROW — Doris Knight — 82

"That's my brand I've put on your lips," Brett bragged. And Tyra realized that this time she would lose her true love, and it would be her own fault!

IDEAL LOVE, published quarterly by Columbia Publications, Inc., 1 Appleton St., Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. Yearly subscriptions 60c, single copy 15c. "Thirty Days in Eden" copyright 1938 by Arcadia House. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope to insure return if not accepted and while reasonable care will be exercised in handling them, they are submitted at author's risk. Printed in U.S.A.

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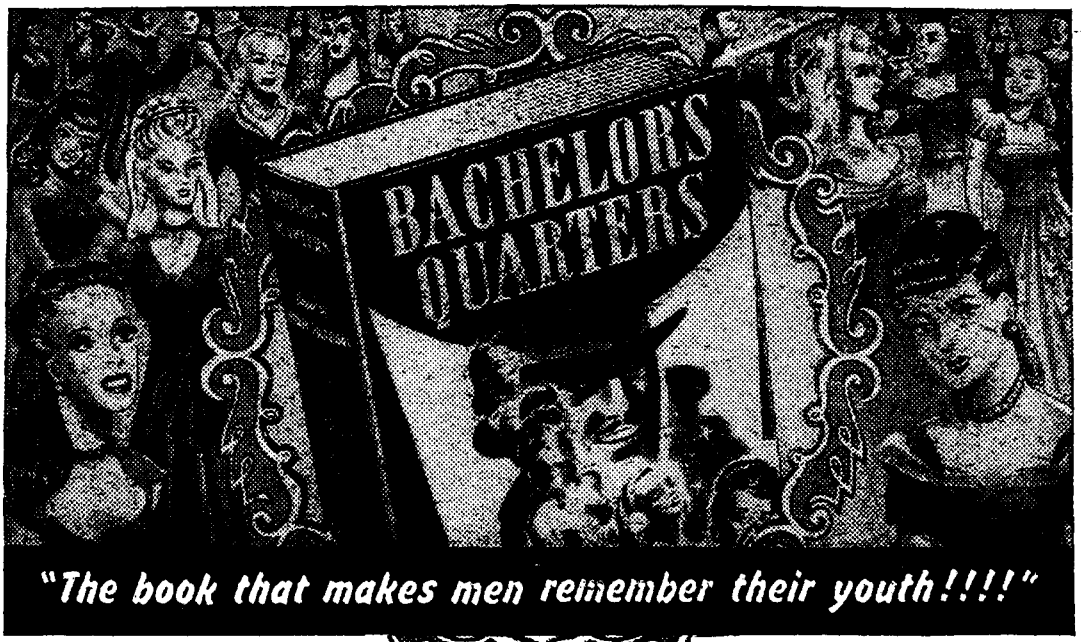

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Complete Booklength Novel

Halfway to Heartbreak

First Magazine Publication

By Gail Sherman

Prologue

EILEEN SUTTON was young and pretty, with shining blonde hair and wide-set blue eyes. In her cheap coat, her figure was slim and elegant. And Eileen was excited: She was thinking over and over, "If only this subway would go faster," as she stared at the letter clutched in her hand. It read:

Dear Miss Sutton—

If you will call at the office here as quickly as convenient you will learn something to your advantage. A representative, having called at your address, was told you were away and we are hoping this letter will reach you before the first of the month.

It as signed by S. Harley, of a firm of lawyers. It sounded mysterious and exciting; and maybe—Eileen hoped this was it—maybe, it meant a job. Because she'd just returned to New York, and was broke. Flat broke and a bit frightened.

When she reached downtown New York, Eileen almost ran to the lawyer's office. When she arrived, a smartly dressed reception clerk looked her over and disappeared into an inner office. A moment later, she came hurriedly out and with a startled look in her eyes, ushered Eileen in.

A middle-aged man, well groomed and impressive looking, stood up to greet Eileen. "I was beginning to be alarmed at not hearing from you," he said pleasantly. "Because, according to the terms of the will, you must be at Oleander Hall not later than mid-

Four young people were to live under the same roof, one of whom was to be selected to inherit Oleander Hall plus one million dollars. Hate was spawned, and jealousy and love.

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night on the thirty-first of this month. And that's only three days off."

Eileen stared at him, bewildered, her heart sinking.

"The terms of a will? Oleander Hall?" she repeated. And then, a trifle thickly, "So it wasn't a job you wanted to see me about?"

Harley, the attorney frowned. "A job? Oh, no!" he answered quickly. "You are one of the prospective heirs of Kirk Halsted, who left a magnificent estate called Oleander Hall, and the sum of one million dollars—"

"Oh," in her disappointment, Eileen spoke sharply. "Oh, there must be a mistake!"

"Mistake?" Harley repeated, frowning. "But, my dear girl, there is no mistake."

"There must be," insisted Eileen. "Because I never in all my life heard of a man named Kirk Halsted and I never in my wildest moments dreamed of knowing anybody who owned an estate or a fraction of a million dollars."

Harley laughed politely as though she had made a good joke.

"My dear young lady," he told her, "I can assure you that before we sent you that first letter, we had all the proof that any court of law could possibly require as to your identity. No worth-while attorney will notify a person in a case like this until every possible proof of that person's claim has been secured. You are the Eileen Sutton for whom I sent."

"But I never heard of Kirk Halted."

"Of course you never heard of Halsted. As a matter of fact, it's not likely that he ever heard of you!" he told her frankly. "But your grandfather, John Lewlyn Sutton, of Milhaven, Georgia, befriended a penniless orphan boy, Kirk Halsted, by giving him his first job.

"Later, when Halsted himself was an old man, and possessed of a fortune he had made, but with no one to whom to leave it, he cast about for the four people who had, in one way or another, influenced his life. Your grandfather being one of these, he had your grandfather's descendants traced. You, as the only child of John Sutton's eldest son, were chosen."

Eileen's head was swimming. She made a stern effort and said at last, "You mean—I'm to inherit—"

"You are one of four contestants from whom will be selected the heir to Oleander Hall and the fortune that goes with it," Mr. Harley interrupted. "Four young people are to spend the month of April at Oleander Hall, the Halsted plantation, and from that four the heir will be selected. You simply have a chance, that is all."

While she was still digesting that he turned to his desk, picked up a long green slip of paper and a voucher.

"If you will sign this voucher," he said briskly, "I have been instructed by Mr. Halsted's attorneys to turn over to you this check for five hundred dollars to cover your expenses until you reach Oleander Hall. That must not be later than midnight on Wednesday. I'd suggest that you leave Pennsylvania Station tomorrow afternoon, if possible, on the six-forty train. It will bring you to Nahunta, the station nearest to Oleander Hall, where you will be met by a conveyance from the hall. Your train will reach Nahunta at four-something on Wednesday afternoon. Is that quite clear?"

"Quite," answered the staggered Eileen. "Only I'm quite sure that it's a dream. It's much too fantastic to be real!"

The lawyer smiled and handed her the check. "Miss Hutchens will go down with you to the bookkeeping department where they are prepared to cash this check for you. The five hundred dollars in perfectly good money, Miss Sutton, should be ample proof that it is not a dream. You can't spend dream-money, you know."

Miss Hutchens came in, was introduced, and Eileen thanked Harley and went like one moving in a dream out into the corridor and down to another office where a bored young man scarcely looked at her as he shoved the money across the counter to her, in exchange for the check. Dazedly, Eileen thanked him and Miss Hutchens and stepped into the

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elevator, clutching her purse with both hands and striving to feel through its cheap sides the pleasantly thick and exciting r 'l of bills.

She had five hundred dollars in cash that she could spend any way she liked if only she saved enough of it to get to this place called Oleander Hall!

It was a dizzying thought. As she reached the front of the building she saw, across the street, the cheerful glow of a restaurant. The windows were oases of warmth and cheer in the bitter cold of the stormy dusk. Here, she told herself as she made her way across the street, was as good a way as any of finding out whether all this was a dream.

She seated herself at a small table beside the wall, the warmth of the place and its cheerful lights folding cosily about her tired, excited body. A waiter came up and Eileen drew a long breath, waved the menu away and said, "Don't bother with that. Bring me a bowl of chicken soup, a steak smothered in mushrooms, a green salad—and apple pie a la mode."

Chapter One

IN THE meantime, other legal firms were busy discovering the descendants of three more people who, at one time or another during Kirk Halsted's youth, had been kind or helpful to him.

In a small apartment just off Peachtree Street, in Atlanta, Isabel Richardson, a last season's debutante whose debut had been financed and managed with a masterful and incredibly daring hand by her youthful mother, was staring with wide, sloe-black eyes at her mother and saying, "But, why should a man we've never seen and whose name we've never heard until this moment, want to leave us even a chance to share in his estate?"

Caroline Richardson dug a spoon into her grapefruit and said cheerfully, "Darling, I haven't the faintest idea. But does it matter? I know it sounds fantastic and all that but the lawyer was a really charming man and I'm quite sure there is no mistake. Anyway, there is the check. And one can't argue away a five hundred dollar check! Besides, it seems that this Halsted creature was quite mad about Mama when she was a girl. Poor Mama seems to have been quite a belle and to have cut quite a swath before she eloped with Dad two hours before she was to marry a man with oodles of money."

She looked up sternly at Isabel and said flatly, "And now you know why it worries me a little that you are so much like Mama in so many ways."

Isabel laughed and her eyes narrowed. "Well, maybe I am like Grandmama, but you needn't worry a moment about my choosing love instead of gold. I've had enough of being genteelly poor and cadging invitations and playing a good game of bridge to keep the dressmakers and department stores from howling. Thanks, darling—but you find me a millionaire and I'll marry him before he can say Jack Robinson."

"Wouldn't it be more to the point if we saw to it that you won out as the heiress to Oleander Hall—and the million—darling?" suggested her mother pertinently. "And then you could afford to fall in love."

"So we're to spend thirty days, expenses free and all that, at this Oleander Hall place?" mused Isabel, as she looked about the small, charming room and drew a long breath.

Caroline touched the check lovingly, her eyes narrowing a little, her carmine-tipped fingers curling about it. "And five hundred dollars for expenses!" she purred happily. "We don't need any clothes. We've got plenty for a month at an old plantation."

Suddenly she leaned across the narrow table and said through her teeth, her eyes frightened, "Isabel, you've *got* to inherit this estate. You've simply *got* to!

Isabel's mouth was a thin line and her dark eyes were cold as a winter stream. "Leave that to me, Mother," she said. It was proof of the solemnity of the promise that she said "Mother" instead of "Caroline."

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CHRISTOPHER GRANT winced as the thin sheaf of envelopes slithered through his fingers. Their outward aspect told him all that he wanted to know. They were all bills and all pointed out, with varying degrees of politeness, that a payment was long overdue and must be made without further delay.

He sighed and looked at a photograph on his desk. The photograph of a lovely woman, with soft dark eyes and a tender mouth, who looked at him reproachfully. She was the one woman who had ever mattered to Christopher Grant. And because he had an income of fifteen hundred a year and neither the training, the ability nor the inclination to earn a living, and because Marcia earned her own and supported an aged father, there was no hope that they could ever marry.

He lifted the sheaf of envelopes to hurl them into the waste-basket One, hitherto unnoticed, fell outside the basket and, as he stooped to pick it up, he saw in the upper left-hand corner the return address of a well-known firm of lawyers. He felt as though a cold wind had blown over him suddenly. Had his charm, his personality, his good looks, his debonair self-assurance failed him, and was one of his creditors actually taking legal steps to collect? It was a chilling thought.

When he had opened the letter, there was a slim green slip of paper complete with a voucher, attached to the letter. He read the letter four times before he could make it clear to his stunned mind that nothing less than a miracle had happened.

It stated, that letter, that he was of four contestants for the estate of one Kirk Halsted, deceased, and that by the terms of the will he must present himself at Oleander Hall, near the island of St. Vincent's along the South Georgia coast—complete directions for reaching Nahunta, the nearest railroad station, were enclosed—not later than midnight on March 31st and there to remain for thirty days, at which time a choice would be made and the estate passed over to the lucky contestant.

Convinced at last that the letter was real, the check genuine and requiring only his signature for cashing, Kit sat down rather heavily in one of the hotel chairs, pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his suddenly damp forehead. Five hundred dollars in cash! And the chance of inheriting a southern plantation, plus a fortune of one million dollars! Once more he glanced at the photograph on the desk, and picked up his hat and hurried out to wire orchids to the girl in the photograph.

When the orchids reached the staid old city where Marcia Wilcox and her father lived, Marcia sat for a long time at her typewriter, the box of flowers in her hand, looking down at the exquisite, fragile beauty of them. There was a strange look in her brown-gold eyes.

One of her office-mates came up, saw the big white box with the name of the town's most expensive florist on it, and said breathlessly, "Good grief, Marcia, who's the boy friend?"

And Marcia said, her brown eyes hardening, "Oh, just a man I don't know very well."

"Well, I'll say he's shooting the works. Orchids—Four of them! That's saying it with flowers," said the office-mate.

"Yes," said Marcia grimly, "that's saying it with flowers. It doesn't seem to occur to Kit to say anything any other way."

Moved by an impulse she didn't stop to control, she flung the orchids at the waste-basket while her office-mate cried out in shoked protest.

"Good grief, gal, ain't you got no romance?" But Marcia had fled to the locker-room.

When she came back a little later, here eyes were faintly pink but her face was carefully washed of tear stains and freshly powdered and her mouth was neatly made up. . . .

Chapter Two

AN OLD MAN looked up over his glasses at the young man who stood before his desk. And the Old Man's expression was

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Isabel had heard a lot about Pat . . . and his millions.

as ferocious as though the young man had made some outrageous and incredible request.

"A month's vacation?" repeated the Old Man as though he could not believe his ears. "In March?"

"Not a vacation, Mr. Roberts," said Mark Hewes patiently, stilling the anger that burned in him at the Old Man's infuriating manner of addressing him. "A leave of absence. I've a

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chance to inherit a bit of money, Mr. Roberts. But one of the terms of the will is that, with the other three contenders, I spend a month at this old plantation."

"Nonsense!" snarled the Old Man savagely. "The most fantastic thing I ever heard of. Young man, you've let your imagination run away with you. Get back to your job—that is, if you like your job and want to keep it."

Suddenly the anger and the irritation that the Old Man's bullying manner to his hirelings had bred deep within Mark, snapped its bonds. For a year he and the rest of the clerks in the offices of the great engineering firm had been enduring the bullying, whip-lashing savagery of the Old Man's bad temper and doing nothing about it.

"Well?" barked the Old Man. "What the devil are you standing there for? Get back to your work! Didn't you hear me?"

"Sure, I heard you—and probably everybody above the tenth floor heard you." Mark lounged against the desk, his hands in his pockets, his manner easy and confident. "But you said *if* I wanted to keep my job—and, you see, I don't. You are a bad-tempered, selfish bully and it would do you a world of good to know what your employees think of you while they're cringing around under your whip-lash!"

"Why—you—" Mark neatly dodged the inkwell hurled at his head.

"Good-by, Mr. Roberts, and thanks a lot for valuable lessons on how not to behave when a fellow's got a little money. I won't be seeing you soon again, I devoutly hope." Mark closed the door neatly behind him as something hurled by the irate Old Man struck the panels of the door from the other side.

The rest of the office force was clustered together, listening. Mark grinned at them, and went whistling to his desk, where he began to get together the very small burden of his personal belongings.

"Gee, Mr. Hewes—fired?" the office boy exclaimed.

"Nope, sonny. I gave the Old Man a piece of my mind and quit!"

A door was yanked open and the office force stood transfixed before their employer's glare. There was a breathless moment and then the Old Man spoke to Branch, the office manager.

"Branch, Hewes here is being given a month's leave of absence. But without salary!" he snapped. He glared at Mark, who stared back at him. And then something happened which left the office force dazed and incredulous for days to come. The Old Man grinned at Mark—and winked! The next moment the door had closed behind him.

* * *

IT WAS an hour before dusk when the train stopped at Nahunta and several passengers alighted. Nahunta is a tiny town that awoke after many years of being a placid village to discover that it was the nearest railway station to the famous Guale Island and St. Vincent's, eighteen miles away along the coast.

Early in the morning and late in the afternoon, when the southbound and northbound trains were due to stop at Nahunta, were the beginning and end, officially, of Nahunta's existence. Several smart cars from the hotel on Guale, or belonging to the colonists, were usually in attendance. Also a local taxi-driver or two hung hopefully about looking for business.

On this particular afternoon, the last day in March, the train deposited five travelers. Three women and two men. It was late in the season for Guale, which was a winter resort, and months too early for St. Vincent's a more plebeian summer place. One of the women was a girl of nineteen. She was wearing a suit beneath a smart top-coat; a gay hat framed her pretty face. Tendrils of corn-silk hair blew back against the brim of her hat and she looked about with eager blue eyes.

The other two women were different. Both were beautiful, in the well-groomed, carefully dressed manner of acquired beauty. Isabel and Caroline looked about them in the brief light left and Isabel said under her breath, "Of all the desolate spots!"

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Caroline murmured, "Careful, darling—at least there won't be any bill collectors."

Kit Grant, assembling a creditable pile of pigskin luggage, attractively worn and embellished with fascinating and authentic labels, looked about him and his eyes rested appraisingly on Isabel and her mother. Taking them in from top to toe without seeming even to notice them; appraising at an amazingly accurate estimate the cost of the smartly simple hats, the superbly tailored suits, the expensive furs slung about their shoulders; wondering just how soon he might be able to meet them and learn the amount of their financial background.

Meanwhile, Mark Hewes surveyed the swamp land greening beyond the narrow limits of the little town and wondered about draining and bridging it. And Eileen Sutton saw only the fresh green woods, starred with the fragile white beauty of dogwoods and laced here and there by great masses of yellow jessamine.

A handsome town-car of ancient make pulled up at the station and a middle-aged Negro in well-cut livery not of the most modern pattern came up to Isabel and Caroline, saying in his soft, mellow voice, "De car from Oleander Hall. Ah expects yo'all is de folks Ah was to meet."

Caroline turned swiftly and her eyes swept the car. It was handsome, expensive and cared for, if not smart. She smiled on the chauffeur and said pleasantly, "Yes, I am Mrs. Richardson and this is my daughter, Miss Isabel."

"Yassum—if yo'all will just step in de car—" said the chauffeur with stately dignity. "Is you for Oleander, too, suh?" he addressed Kit, who was looking at Isabel and her mother with a faint regret.

"Yes, of course—my bags are there. See to them, please," said Kit and introduced himself to Isabel and Caroline.

The chaffeur looked about the platform and approached Eileen who turned and smiled eagerly. And Mark also nodded. He and Eileen smiled at each other and turned towards the car.

Caroline noted their approach with distaste. "But surely you don't expect all of us to ride back here?" she said crisply, to the chaffeur, ignoring Mark and Eileen.

"Well, to tell de truth," said the chaffeur frankly, "dey ain't but four people dat was expected—"

Caroline's head went up haughtily. "But surely no one expected me to permit my daughter to come here unchaperoned?" she said frostily.

CAROLINE and Isabel continued to look frostily at Eileen and neither made the slightest move to allow her to enter. Nor did Kit suggest that he, too, could ride up front. Simply, the three of them presented a blank immovability to Eileen who flushed and stood back.

"I—well, perhaps I'd better wait and come out on the station-wagon," she said humbly.

Mark and Kit exchanged glances. "Perhaps you and I, Mr. Grant, could ride out on the station-wagon," suggested Mark with deceptive mildness.

Kit grinned faintly. "Sorry, old boy, but I couldn't think of it. An old polo injury, you know—station-waggons are deucedly bumpy. Besides, Mrs. Richardson and her daughter might be frightened, driving alone."

"It's quite all right," said Eileen swiftly. "Here's the station-wagon now and it's open—I'd much rather really," she pleaded against the look in Mark's eyes as they rested on Kit.

Mark stepped back, slammed the door of the big car. "Then, carry on, my lad," he said to the chaffeur. "The lady and I will be out later."

The chaffeur shot him a single, curious glance. The next moment he had lowered his eyes and said in an expressionless tone, "Yassuh!"

The town-car slid away and the station-wagon, driven by a grinning, half-grown yellow boy, took its place.

"From Oleander Hall, I see," Mark said cheerfully. "Well, you're going to have passengers on the return trip."

He surveyed the small sea of baggage, dominated by Kit's pigskin bags and Isabel's and Caroline's smart-

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ly striped suitcases, hat-trunks and overnight cases. He looked down at Eileen, grinned, and said, "Which is yours?"

"Those two suitcases and that hat-box," answered Eileen.

"Good!" said Mark and stowed them in the station wagon. His own single suitcase followed. "Now which of these do you think the ladies would consider most essential?"

"The overnight cases," answered Eileen, and pointed them out.

"Good," said Mark and carefully set them to one side. "They probably wouldn't have a bit of use for this hat-trunk, without the rest of the stuff, would they?"

"I don't think so," answered Eileen and watched wide-eyed, while Mark very carefully stowed the hat-trunk in the car. He followed it with a set of golf-clubs from Kit's baggage, dusted his hands, turned to Eileen and bowed. "And now, my lady, I believe we have everything that we can carry comfortably. Let's go, boy!"

Eileen, looking back in dismay at the small sea of luggage, said, "But what will happen to all that?"

Mark shrugged airily. "Oh, somebody will take care of it—probably," he said cheerfully. "Smell the air! Isn't it marvelous?"

Eileen studied him curiously for a moment and then she said, "They're going to be furious, you know."

Mark grinned at her. "You catch on fast," he assured her.

"But, honestly—" she protested.

"Look," said Mark, without waiting for her to finish, "the four of us are going to spend a full month here shut up in the same house together. And if you start out by letting them snub you and treat you as they wouldn't dare treat a servant, they'll be walking on your neck with hobnailed boots before the end of the first week. You've got to stand up to them and fight for your rights!"

Eileen drew a long breath. "I don't fight very well," she confessed. "I'm terribly unimportant and I know it—and it sort of saps my self-confidence."

"Unimportant? Who said you were?" demanded Mark.

"Nobody," answered Eileen meekly. "I just know that I am, that's all. I never had any family. An aunt brought me up and she died when I was fourteen. I've been scrambling about making my own living since then. There hasn't been anybody—"

"Well, you stop that train of thought right here and now," said Mark firmly. "You *are* important. And don't ever let me hear you say again that you aren't important."

Eileen said quickly, "I won't! Maybe there is something for me to do—or be!"

"Of course there is," said Mark promptly.

THE ROAD ran along through beautiful woods, sometimes mile after mile of fine, straight pine lifting their towering tops while their gashed sides spilled their life-blood into small earthenware pots bound beneath tiny grooves of zinc. A turpentine grove. Occasionally they flashed past crude little farmhouses, hip-deep in peach trees finishing their blooming season, with the cream-white loveliness of the pear trees for further accent.

They came at last to the small coastal town, where spring gardens burgeoned and the trees were fresh green, the long draperies of Spanish moss showing a surprising shadow of green beneath its silvery gray.

It was almost dusk when they turned from the high-way along a rutted narrow road that had been slashed through the heart of a forest and came out at last before Oleander Hall.

The great old house dreamed in the lovely magic of that spring day. An unexpected cold snap had delayed the azaleas so that now they were just coming into their perfection of bloom, spreading an incredible tapestry over the lawn and among the ancient trees. The mile-long double row of oleanders that gave the place its name was sprayed with the rose and white and delicate pink pompoms that would soon open into full flower.

The house itself was of ancient, weathered stone called tabby-brick. Set on a low, wide terrace so that the azaleas were like a vari-colored wave

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of beauty splashing against the mellow old grayness, the place offered a sight that neither Eileen nor Mark was ever to forget.

Though the front of the house was towards the drive and the double row of oleanders, there was a wide terrace at the back that was flagstoned and set with painted iron furniture as an outdoor living-room.

Eileen and Mark, not yet acquainted with the back terrace, stood still on the wide, shallow steps of the front entrance, looking out over the rolling masses of vari-colored azaleas, the velvety green lawn. At the left, down the terrace steps, a path led into the garden and this was a blaze of color that bereft Eileen of speech. Every imaginable spring blossom bloomed, and Eileen, starved for beauty and color all her life, felt a little drunk with the sight of it all.

It was Mark who saw first the very old man in his earth-stained khaki trousers and shirt beneath a battered old sweater. The man approached the steps and bared his head as he looked curiously from one to the other.

"You are the young people who are to visit for a month?" he asked. "I'm Bowan, the gardener. I'm glad you came while the flowers are at their best."

Eileen smiled at him mistily and blinked the tears from her eyes. "I'm an awful fool," she stammered. "But it's so beautiful I want to cry."

"My flowers would be very happy to know that you admire them so much," said Bowan with an old fashioned, courtly grace. "You must let me introduce you to them."

"Thank you," said Eileen and smiled again.

"That's an unusally fine yew-hedge," said Mark indicating the long tunnel-like double row of the old trees.

Bowan glanced at the hedge and then at Mark and smiled faintly, his wrinkled face touched him with an odd look. "Yes, it's very fine," he answered almost carelessly. "It's the Ghost Walk."

"That what?" cried Eileen, startled.

"The Ghost Walk," answered Bowan. "You see, at the end of that row of yew trees is the old family burying ground. It's been used since Oleander Hall was first built, more than two hundred years ago. The superstitious folk claim that the ghosts of the family walk there at night, when the moon is full—that they love the place so well they can't rest away from it."

"I can believe that," said Eileen softly. "If I had lived here all my life, I'd never want to leave it, not even for Heaven, when I was dead."

Mark said lightly, "Why leave Eden for Paradise?" Eden *is* Paradise. And it's ours for thirty days!"

"JUST THIRTY days?" asked Bowan quietly. "Aren't you one of the contenders for the place?"

Mark chuckled. "Oh, I suppose so—only I don't have any hope of inheriting. I never knew Mr. Halsted, or even heard of him, and—well, the month's vacation with five hundred dollars was quite enough for me. I'll stay my month and go away grateful!"

"So will I," said Eileen, looking about her with happy eyes. "It will give me something to remember as long as I live?"

Mark looked curiously at Bowan. "Did you know Mr. Halsted?" he asked.

"Yes," said Bowan. "I've been his gardener for thirty years. He was a good employer and a kind man. I think you would have liked him."

"That will do, Bowan," said a crisp, businesslike voice and Eileen and Mark turned to face a woman of, perhaps, sixty. She was tall and slender, erect, with neatly dressed snow-white hair. Her black taffeta dress was protected by an old-fashioned white lawn apron tied about her middle. "How do you do? I am Mrs. Grable, the housekeeper. And I suppose you're Mr. Hewes and Miss Sutton, since Miss Richardson and Mr. Grant have already arrived. We weren't expecting Miss Richardson's mother, but fortunately, there's ample room. If you'll come with me, I'll show you to your rooms."

Eileen's room was a big, pleasant room at the back, overlooking the Ghost Walk.

"I had planned that you and Miss

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Richardson should have adjoining rooms at the other side of the house," Mrs. Grable explained. "But when Mrs. Richardson saw the room I had prepared for you, she insisted on having it for herself. So I hope you won't mind. This is really the nicer of the two. You can see the ocean here."

A neat maid in black and white came in, carrying Eileen's bags and Mrs. Grable said crisply, "This is Susie, Miss Sutton. She will look after you, see that your clothes are in order and act as your maid.

Suzie was unpacking for Eileen, putting her simple clothes away, when the door was opened without the preliminary of a knock. Isabel stood there, her eyes blazing, her face quite white.

"There's some nonsense about your leaving our luggage at the station," she burst out, as though she could not force herself to believe that such had really happened.

"I'm sorry," Eileen said quietly. "There wasn't room in the station-wagon for all of it. Edward, who drove us, said it would be brought over in the morning."

"In the morning!" Isabel was outraged. "But what on earth are we to do tonight? Mother and I have nothing to wear down to dinner?"

"Then I'm afraid you won't be able to dress for dinner tonight," answered Eileen. "I shall be glad to lend you anything I can."

"No, thanks. As though we'd borrow clothes!" snapped Isabel. "Of course you brought your own luggage!"

"There were only three pieces of it," answered Eileen. "It wasn't hard to fit it in. But there were eleven pieces of yours and your mother's, and six of Mr. Grant's. I'm really very sorry."

"Oh—sorry!" flamed Isabel and dashed out, banging the door hard behind her..."

Chapter Three

DINNER WAS NOT an especially pleasant meal. Four people, potential heirs to a vast fortune and a magnificent estate, meeting for the first time under this gracious old roof which would, at the end of thirty days, belong to one of them, the other three disappointed; not one of the four with the faintest inkling as to just what quality or qualities inherent in himself, would tend towards improving his chances to inherit; each watching the other with a strained, hostile glance—measuring, judging, estimating, balancing.

Eileen, perhaps, was the least hostile of the four. At the very beginning she had told herself that she hadn't a chance in the world of inheriting, because the day of miracles was past, although she felt a bit guilty at even such a thought, for the five hundred dollars coming at such a time had most certainly been a miracle. And so had this month in Eden. She had two hundred dollars safely tucked into a savings account in New York. And when the month was over, her health would have been made perfect by a vacation in this enchanted climate and the two hundred dollars would stand her in good stead until she found another job.

Caroline eyed the four young people before her with faintly narrowed eyes. There was a look about her lovely, carefully made-up mouth that was almost predatory. She and Isabel had scraped by perilously with their expenses for the last year or two. They had long ago given up the hope of living on their tiny income and had instead, recklessly gone into their search for a rich husband.

The five hundred dollars and the chance at inheriting this old place with its fortune was, both Caroline and Isabel well knew, their one chance for an escape from the unpleasantness of their present life into something more in keeping with their not-modest demands.

As for Kit Grant, his thoughts were upon Marcia. How she would fit into this setting! It would be perfect for her quiet, gracious personality. She would run the house smoothly, efficiently, and within its walls they could build an Eden so perfect that he hardly dared think of it.

And yet, cannily, he considered

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another angle. Suppose he should not be selected as the winning competitor. Suppose one of the two girls before him should win! A man who had his wits about him would see to it that before the competition was settled, he had a tacit "understanding" with the winner. If he could not inherit in his own right, and share the place with Marcia, he might yet share it with an attractive wife. Both the girls were attractive, he told himself, studying them without seeming to do so.

Isabel was of his own world. She would fit in perfectly among his friends. Yet—from what little he had been able to glean about the eccentric Mr. Halsted, a girl of Eileen's type would be more to Mr. Halsted's taste and so, no doubt, have a better chance of inheriting. Eileen was much too simple and unaffected and unsophisticated to appeal to Kit's taste in women.

And Mark, as he ate with hearty and unashamed enjoyment of the delicious food set before him, wondered about the other three at the table and told himself that he had Isabel's and her mother's number pretty accurately. "Very top-drawer social set," he told himself, "and they'd like to walk all over Eileen rough-shod. So we must see to it that they don't get a chance. And as for this weasel Grant—what a phony!"

DINNER was simple but delicious. Served in the old-fashioned southern style of great platters of food placed on the table, an attentive maid and the middle-aged butler to pass plates and change dishes. A heaping platter of fried chicken, another of cold sliced baked ham, tiny beaten biscuit brought in every now and then piping hot from the kitchen; crisp baby lettuce with home-grown tomatoes sliced thinly and topped with a bit of tangy French dressing, bowls of pickles and jelly.

But Caroline, Isabel and Kit exchanged humorously wry glances and Caroline said crisply, "I think it would be as well to speak to Mrs. Grable about this appalling service."

Above her head the butler exchanged a swift, significant glance with the maid, but neither spoke.

After dinner in the drawing-room with its wide French doors open to the terrace, below which the white azaleas dreamed in the black and silver mosaic of moonlight, Caroline said, "And now I think it's time we all had a chat and planned our campaign. Mr—Hewes, is it?—will you see that none of the servants are listening outside that door?"

Mark rose, barely concealing a grin, and looked along the length of the big hall.

"Nary an eavesdropper," he said cheerfully and sat down where he could watch Eileen.

"Good!" said Caroline. "And now I suggest that we all lay our cards on the table and pool our knowledge of the situation and see what conclusion we can come to."

"It won't take more than half a moment for me to comply," said Mark. "I never heard of Kirk Halsted in my life until three days ago and I don't believe that, just because my grandmother befriended him as a hungry orphan, he intended to leave the estate to me."

Caroline pounced quickly—too quickly, she saw after a moment. "Then you are resigning your chances?" she asked eagerly, and flushed beneath the amused look in Mark's eyes that was very near contempt.

"Not in a million years," he said. "My chances are probably extremely slim—but I'm sticking to 'em."

Eileen, only half listening to the conversation, looked up at a painting above the mantel. It was the portrait of a woman, lovely and radiantly young, wearing the crinolines and chignon of Civil War days. She had noticed the picture earlier in the afternoon but now she was particularly struck by the peculiarly alive quality of the eyes. She could have sworn they were looking straight at her and she felt an eerie sensation as the eyes met hers squarely—and then moved! One moment they were meeting her startled gaze levelly; the next they were looking just as straight as Mark.

She cried out, sharply, startled and a little shaken. The eyes swung back

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to hers, and now there was a startled expression in them. The next moment the eyes were once more painted canvas.

"'What's wrong, Eileen?" demanded Mark, and she tore her eyes from the painting to look at him.

"The eyes—in that picture—they—they looked—so alive," she stammered, scarlet with confusion at feeling the eyes of the others upon her.

"Nonsense!" said Isabel sharply. "You've been hearing ghost stories."

"Of course—remember old Bowan, telling you about the Ghost Walk?" said Mark, and chuckled as he stood up. "Come along let's have a look at his garden in the moonlight. I don't think a discussion of our mutual chances, Mrs. Richardson, is going to get us anywhere.

Eileen stood up, suddenly anxious to escape from the room because the feeling that the eyes of that painting were alive had been a very vivid one. As she looked back from the doorway, she saw Kit on his feet beneath the picture, his hands in his pockets, his eyes riveted to the canvas, while Caroline and Isabel were moving towards the terrace and the basket-chairs that sat there.

Outside on the wide stone steps that led down to the garden, Eileen looked up a Mark and said unsteadily, "I hate making a fool of myself, but—honestly—those eyes *were* alive—for a moment."

Mark studied her curiously. "Are you fond of ghost stories, Eileen? Or mystery stories?"

Eileen shook her bright head. "They frighten me to death," she confessed.

The garden was a splendid one, dating back to the time when the house had been brave and new. Generations had built it and tended it and loved it to its present perfection. Later, the visitors were to learn that the box-wood that hedged the garden and formed the small but very complete and intricate maze had been brought over from England and that it was among the finest in the country.

But tonight Mark and Eileen were a pretty, shy girl and an impressionable young man, walking hand in hand through an enchanted garden where snap-dragons and delphiniums and yellow calendulas and such old-fashioned flowers lifted blossoms gratefully to the soft night air.

THE MORNING dawned gloriously. From her wide window, Eileen looked out into the heart of a flowering tree that was the loveliest thing she had seen. Its leaves were thick, satiny green and shaped like a magnolia leaf only much smaller.

Beyond the branches, she saw Bowan kneeling beside a bed of rich black soil where he was carefully transplating some plants. She had her shower and dressed quickly in one of the new cotton frocks that the shop-girl in New York had told her would be ideal for a southern spring day.

Eileen went out into the garden where Bowan looked up from his work to smile at her gay greeting.

"What are you doing now, Mr. Bowan?" Eileen asked with the eager, unashamed curiosity of an interested child.

"Putting out zinnias and marigolds," answered Bowan. "The spring flowers will soon be gone, you know, and we'll want something to take their place. There's nothing more accommodating than zinnias and marigolds."

"Let me help," begged Eileen.

Bowan gave her a trowel and indicated the proper place for the small, sturdy seedlings. Without seeming to do so, he watched her handling the little plants as though they were infinitely fragile, placing them, watering them carefully and gently tamping the earth about their roots. He barely restrained a little nod of approval as she went on, absorbed and intent, the sunlight gold on her fair hair caressing the thin cheek and the pretty turn of her white throat.

"May I come back after breakfast and plant some more, Mr. Bowan?" she begged, and had his assent before she went along the neat graveled walk to the house.

Bowan watched her as she went and there was a curious light in his faded eyes as he nodded and said half aloud, "She'll do, that one! The master

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would like her. She's *his* kind of people."

The terrace, which last night had dreamed in the strange white semi-tropic moonlight, was drenched with sunshine this morning and the shade of a green and white striped awning was welcome. Beneath this cool shadow, a square glass-topped table set in white-painted iron had been set with peasant pottery and golden-yellow napkins. A bowl of yellow calendulas in the center reflected the sunlight and laughed back at the beauty of the morning.

Mark had been waiting for Eileen and greeted her with the warm, friendly cheerfulness that lifted her spirits as he held her chair for her. When they were seated, he grinned at her and indicated the matchless beauty of the scene before them as he dug a silver spoon into the pale green-yellow of his honeydew melon.

"And back home," he told her as though he finished with her a conversation he had been holding with himself, "it's probably raining and glowering. And breakfast—on last night's dinner-table cloth which isn't quite as immaculate as one might wish—consists of four—never under any circumstances more!—cold prunes, a fried egg, two pieces of toast and a cup of coffee."

Eileen nodded. "You're lucky," she told him quietly. "Back at *my* home—a trunk-room on the fourth floor at the back, right beneath the roof—breakfast would be two rolls from the bakery and a glass of milk, if I were lucky. It might not even be anything. Lots of time it hasn't been."

"How the dickens did a kid like you ever get tangled up in a town like New York?" Mark inquired.

"I was born there," answered Eileen simply. "My father was a newspaper man. We used to have lots of fun. Never very much money—but an awful lot of fun. And then he was killed during a big fire, and—well, Mother didn't seem to care much about living after that. I was twelve and—some friends of theirs took me on for a bit. But they had lots of children and no money, and as soon as I was sixteen I started shifting for myself."

"Not *too* much [fun]," Mark said gently.

Eileen shook her head [and] her eyes were somber. "Not to[o much]," she agreed.

Mark said suddenly, "Look [here] Eileen, I hope you're the one who [in]herits this place! You're very becoming to it—or did you know that?"

Eileen colored beneath the look in his eyes and said quickly, "But it would frighten me to death. I wouldn't know what to do with a lovely place like this—how to manage it—"

"If you were very smart, you'd just sit by gracefully and let the crowd that is managing it at present go on doing the same. Mrs. Grable seems pretty competent, I'd say."

A VOICE from the doorway said pleasantly, "Good morning. Who's pretty competent for what, Hewes? Rather special sort of morning isn't it?"

It was Kit, big and dark and disturbingly good-looking, thought Eileen with an unexpected stirring of her pulses. In flannels, bare headed, his thick dark hair brushed until it fitted his head like a sleek cap, she thought him by far the handsomest man she had ever seen. She turned her eyes suddenly to Mark to discover that he had been watching her curiously.

Kit was completely unaware of the startled glance that sped between Eileen and Mark. He seated himself and a maid brought him a green glass bowl in which, in a nest of ice, half a honeydew melon nestled temptingly.

"I must say they treat a fellow rather well here," said Kit, eyeing the melon hungrily. "What's your thought about the set-up here, Hewes?"

"Afraid I haven't much idea," said Mark curtly. "I'm not looking very far beyond the five hundred dollars and the thirty days we're to spend here—a vacation I appreciate a whole lot."

"But what the dickens—I mean, the thing that's got me pondering," said Kit, having sampled the melon and found it to his taste, "is how the

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is to be chosen. I going to decide? And decision to be based?" lucky con- w that," said Mark, "I mean wouldn't be broadcasting or

eyed him for a moment and it ed to Eileen that sword of enmi- flashed between the two men. Mark was so plainly one of the workers of the world, Kit just as plainly a dilettante, idling his way through life and quite content to have it so, that there wasn't the faintest chance that these two could ever be friends, even if only outwardly.

"Quite so," said Kit after a moment and barely concealed a small grin as he returned to his melon. "But a fellow can't help wondering. I mean, if all of us have an equal claim to the benefactions of the late lamented Mr. Halsted, I can't quite see how, without a resident judge or something of the sort, a decision is to be made."

"Is it your thought, Grant," suggested Mark unexpectedly, "that we're being spied upon by some hidden watcher?"

Kit looked up so sharply that Eileen thought there was something almost guilty in his manner. "Why—whatever gave you such a thought, old boy?" he asked derisively.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Mark vaguely. "I was just following out the trend of your idea—wondering how the decision was to be made—"

"It's a definitely unpleasant thought that we are being spied upon. I don't like it at all," said Kit swiftly, frowning a little. "Though, at that, it could easily be. The servants, do you think?"

"Surely even a man as eccentric as this Mr. Halsted must have been would scarcely trust his servants to decide a bequest of such proportions," argued Mark. "If he had thought that well of the servants, why wouldn't he have just divided the fortune among them?"

Kit nodded, thinking hard. "That sounds logical enough."

"You know, of course, don't you, what the four of us would do if we were very, very smart?" Mark suggested coolly. He had finished his breakfast and was lighting a cigarette, giving all his attention to it, while Kit and Eileen waited.

"We'd make a compact," Mark continued after a moment. "We'd agree to share and share alike. Whoever was elected heir would agree to divide equally with the other three—which would mean two hundred and fifty thousand dollars apiece, and, I suppose, joint ownership of Oleander Hall—probably each of the four to occupy it three months of each year."

Kit hesitated. It was plain that the idea did not appeal to him. Yet—if he did not happen to be elected as the heir—it would guarantee him a handsome sum.

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Mark!" said Eileen eagerly.

Kit shoved back his chair, flung his crumpled napkin to the table and said curtly, "I'll have to think it over. I'll let you know later what I think."

He strode out and Mark grinned unpleasantly. Eileen said suddenly, almost sharply:

"Stop looking so pleased with yourself! I don't blame him a bit! It—it was a crazy idea—"

"Look here, Eileen," said Mark with quiet emphasis, "don't you go getting crazy ideas about Kit Grant in that little taffy-colored head of yours. He's bad medicine for nice little girls like you—"

Eileen flung up her head with unexpected spirit. "Considering that you never set eyes on him in your life until yesterday, I don't know how you happen to be so wise!" she flamed indignantly.

Mark's eyebrows went up a little and he said mildly, though his eyes were angry, "I don't have to know a man a lifetime to be able to know that he's not what a girl like you should have!"

Eileen said nothing, and Mark, watching her, added quickly, "Come to think of it, you never set eyes on him yourself until yesterday. How comes it you're so wrought up over him?"

"I'm *not* wrought up over him," Eileen protested furiously, her cheeks quite pink.

"Then what's all the battle about?"

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"I'm not battling!" still more indignantly. "I only said you had no right to condemn him just because he doesn't want to hand over three-quarters of a million dollars. It's a lot of money, you know, even if you haven't got it."

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He held out his hands, palm upward, and said coaxingly, "Friends?"

Eileen, flushed and uncomfortably aware of having made herself rather ridiculous, put her hand in his and laughed. "Friends, of course."

"Good!" said Mark. "Only I still think you ought to let him alone!"

Eileen snatched her hand from his and her eyes flashed. "But I've just told you," she cried hotly, "I'm *not* bothering him."

"Maybe not. But you're bothering me! The way you look at him, the way your voice sort of sings—"

"Mark Hewes, I think you're the—the—craziest man I ever saw!" she raged with childish fury as she turned and ran out of the room.

Chapter Four

ISABEL and Caroline drifted downstairs in time for lunch and admitted quite frankly that they were bored to tears.

"What do you suppose one could do for amusement?" Isabel addressed herself to Kit as though quite certain that nothing either of the others could suggest would be remotely helpful.

"It's only a few miles to Guale Island. Suppose we go over there for a swim? And we might have tea at the hotel. Who knows? There might be some amusing people over there," suggested Kit helpfully.

Isabel agreed animatedly. Kit gracefully included the others in his invitation but Mark declined.

Although it was a little late in the season, a number of guests who knew that April is Guale's loveliest season still lingered at the Cloister, so the island, while it was not wrapped in its midseason gaiety was far from dull. Girls in linen shorts raced about the tennis courts, babies sprawled on the beach while attentive nurses gossiped and knitted and settled inevitable squabbles; a number of the older set were busy at the bridge tables; half a dozen men were on the skeet-shooting range.

"Looks like fun," said Isabel happily as the car swung across the bridge and turned at the hotel entrance, and Kit nodded, as pleased as she. "Now if only we find somebody we know—"

"Hello, Grant—what brings you down?" demanded a tall, good-looking young man in flannels, a tennis racquet tucked comfortably under his arm. But though he spoke to Kit, his eyes were on Isabel in swift and frank admiration.

"Oh, DeBardeleben, how are you?" said Kit. He presented Caroline and Isabel and DeBardeleben, smiling down at Isabel in keen interest, said quickly, "You're just in time for tea."

Isabel laughed, as lightly and carelessly as though her heart was not racing like mad. "But we've just had lunch—and it's only three o'clock."

"We came over for a swim," Kit explained pleasantly, missing nothing of what was happening between the stranger and Isabel.

"Oh—then you're not staying at Guale?" asked DeBardeleben and was frankly disappointed.

"No, we're members of a house-party at Oleander Hall—on Black River. You know the place?" said Kit.

"Of course," answered DeBardeleben. "The Halsted place. I hear it's quite wonderful. I've never seen it."

"Then," said Caroline graciously, "you must come to tea some afternoon and see it."

"Thanks," said Debardeleben. "How would tomorrow afternoon do?"

"Splendid," said Caroline and

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smiled at his impetuosity. "And now if we're going to swim—"

"You couldn't be cruel enough to refuse me permission to join you?" pleaded DeBardeleben coaxingly.

"Of course not—come along—glad to have you," said the three of them together.

Later, while Caroline and Isabel were changing in one of the Casino cabanas which DeBardeleben had put at their disposal, Isabel said half under her breath, as though awed by the miracle, "Caroline, do you realize who that is? Pat DeBardeleben, no less! I've tried for a solid six months to meet him, but without being too obvious about it. Grace Carter has ridden herd on him so shamelessly that no one else has been able to get in hearing distance of him."

"But now that Grace is in the hospital—" mused Caroline.

"And there's no engagement between them—" added Isabel.

They were silent for a moment, eyes meeting eyes, finding no need for words. For Pat DeBardeleben was the only son of one of the richest men in the country and his future wife would regard the Oleander inheritance as so much pin-money.

"I think," said Caroline very carefully, "we might ask Mr. DeBardeleben to dinner tonight, don't you?"

"You don't think it would look as though we were—too anxious?" Isabel hesitated.

"Certainly not!" answered her mother. "Darling, it's a Heaven-sent opportunity. You couldn't entertain him properly in town even if Grace relaxed her clutch on him long enough to give you a chance. But here—with Oleander for a background—my dear, there was never such an opportunity. We can't afford to waste a moment. It would be just like that wretched Grace to decide to spend her convalescence at Guale."

Isabel nodded. "You don't suppose that Grable woman would dare to object?" she suggested uneasily.

"A servant? Don't be absurd, my dear. Leave the Grable woman to me. Just you handle DeBardeleben—and be thankful for an opportunity straight from the gods, darling."

DEBARDELEBEN and Kit were waiting for them as they came out. Caroline's heart sang as she saw the look in his eyes as they rested on Isabel in the white hand-knit bathing suit that moulded her superb young figure to perfection.

They swam together, Kit devoting himself courteously to Caroline, yet not being too obvious about giving Isabel and DeBardeleben some time together. Later they had tea in the patio and met some of DeBardeleben's friends, and it was all gay and merry. When they left the hotel to drive back to Oleander, Caroline realized that, somehow, they had invited three other guests to come with DeBardeleben to dinner at Oleander.

Immediately when she reached her room, Caroline sent a maid to tell Mrs. Grable that there would be four more guests for dinner. She was dressing when Mrs. Grable came to the door.

"You have some guests coming for dinner?" Mrs. Grable said quietly.

"Yes—didn't Mamie tell you? There'll be four," said Caroline, as sure of herself and as matter of fact as though Oleander Hall were already her own and Mrs. Grable her servant.

"I'm sorry I didn't know earlier, but we will do the best we can under the circumstances," said Mrs. Grable.

"Are you pretending that there isn't enough food for four extra people?" Caroline inquired haughtily.

"There are squabs, Mrs. Richardson, and we had prepared for five people," said Mrs. Grable. "It's impossible to stretch five squabs, you know—but we'll have the squabs tomorrow and I'll see what can be done."

"I'm sure you can manage beautifully," returned Caroline. "Be sure the cocktails are properly iced and there are canapes, of course?"

"I'm afraid not," returned Mrs. Grable. "Another time, if you will give me a little notice, I'll be glad to serve an adequate dinner for your friends."

She went quietly out and closed the door behind her. Caroline was fu-

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would like her. She's *his* kind of people."

The terrace, which last night had dreamed in the strange white semi-tropic moonlight, was drenched with sunshine this morning and the shade of a green and white striped awning was welcome. Beneath this cool shadow, a square glass-topped table set in white-painted iron had been set with peasant pottery and golden-yellow napkins. A bowl of yellow calendulas in the center reflected the sunlight and laughed back at the beauty of the morning.

Mark had been waiting for Eileen and greeted her with the warm, friendly cheerfulness that lifted her spirits as he held her chair for her. When they were seated, he grinned at her and indicated the matchless beauty of the scene before them as he dug a silver spoon into the pale green-yellow of his honeydew melon.

"And back home," he told her as though he finished with her a conversation he had been holding with himself, "it's probably raining and glowering. And breakfast—on last night's dinner-table cloth which isn't quite as immaculate as one might wish—consists of four—never under any circumstances more!—cold prunes, a fried egg, two pieces of toast and a cup of coffee."

Eileen nodded. "You're lucky," she told him quietly. "Back at *my* home—a trunk-room on the fourth floor at the back, right beneath the roof—breakfast would be two rolls from the bakery and a glass of milk, if I were lucky. It might not even be anything. Lots of time it hasn't been."

"How the dickens did a kid like you ever get tangled up in a town like New York?" Mark inquired.

"I was born there," answered Eileen simply. "My father was a newspaper man. We used to have lots of fun. Never very much money—but an awful lot of fun. And then he was killed during a big fire, and—well, Mother didn't seem to care much about living after that. I was twelve and—some friends of theirs took me on for a bit. But they had lots of children and no money, and as soon as I was sixteen I started shifting for myself."

"Not *too* much fun," said Mark gently.

Eileen shook her head and her blue eyes were somber. "Not too much," she agreed.

Mark said suddenly, "Look here, Eileen, I hope you're the one who inherits this place! You're very becoming to it—or did you know that?"

Eileen colored beneath the look in his eyes and said quickly, "But it would frighten me to death. I wouldn't know what to do with a lovely place like this—how to manage it—"

"If you were very smart, you'd just sit by gracefully and let the crowd that is managing it at present go on doing the same. Mrs. Grable seems pretty competent, I'd say."

A VOICE from the doorway said pleasantly, "Good morning. Who's pretty competent for what, Hewes? Rather special sort of morning isn't it?"

It was Kit, big and dark and disturbingly good-looking, thought Eileen with an unexpected stirring of her pulses. In flannels, bare headed, his thick dark hair brushed until it fitted his head like a sleek cap, she thought him by far the handsomest man she had ever seen. She turned her eyes suddenly to Mark to discover that he had been watching her curiously.

Kit was completely unaware of the startled glance that sped between Eileen and Mark. He seated himself and a maid brought him a green glass bowl in which, in a nest of ice, half a honeydew melon nestled temptingly.

"I must say they treat a fellow rather well here," said Kit, eyeing the melon hungrily. "What's your thought about the set-up here, Hewes?"

"Afraid I haven't much idea," said Mark curtly. "I'm not looking very far beyond the five hundred dollars and the thirty days we're to spend here—a vacation I appreciate a whole lot."

"But what the dickens—I mean, the thing that's got me pondering," said Kit, having sampled the melon and found it to his taste, "is how the

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lucky contestant is to be chosen. I mean, who is going to decide? And on what is the decision to be based?"

"If I knew that," said Mark, "I certainly wouldn't be broadcasting it."

Kit eyed him for a moment and it seemed to Eileen that sword of enmity flashed between the two men. Mark was so plainly one of the workers of the world, Kit just as plainly a dilettante, idling his way through life and quite content to have it so, that there wasn't the faintest chance that these two could ever be friends, even if only outwardly.

"Quite so," said Kit after a moment and barely concealed a small grin as he returned to his melon. "But a fellow can't help wondering. I mean, if all of us have an equal claim to the benefactions of the late lamented Mr. Halsted, I can't quite see how, without a resident judge or something of the sort, a decision is to be made."

"Is it your thought, Grant," suggested Mark unexpectedly, "that we're being spied upon by some hidden watcher?"

Kit looked up so sharply that Eileen thought there was something almost guilty in his manner. "Why—whatever gave you such a thought, old boy?" he asked derisively.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Mark vaguely. "I was just following out the trend of your idea—wondering how the decision was to be made—"

"It's a definitely unpleasant thought that we are being spied upon. I don't like it at all," said Kit swiftly, frowning a little. "Though, at that, it could easily be. The servants, do you think?"

"Surely even a man as eccentric as this Mr. Halsted must have been would scarcely trust his servants to decide a bequest of such proportions," argued Mark. "If he had thought that well of the servants, why wouldn't he have just divided the fortune among them?"

Kit nodded, thinking hard. "That sounds logical enough."

"You know, of course, don't you, what the four of us would do if we were very, very smart?" Mark suggested coolly. He had finished his breakfast and was lighting a cigarette, giving all his attention to it, while Kit and Eileen waited.

"We'd make a compact," Mark continued after a moment. "We'd agree to share and share alike. Whoever was elected heir would agree to divide equally with the other three—which would mean two hundred and fifty thousand dollars apiece, and, I suppose, joint ownership of Oleander Hall—probably each of the four to occupy it three months of each year."

Kit hesitated. It was plain that the idea did not appeal to him. Yet—if he did not happen to be elected as the heir—it would guarantee him a handsome sum.

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Mark!" said Eileen eagerly.

Kit shoved back his chair, flung his crumpled napkin to the table and said curtly, "I'll have to think it over. I'll let you know later what I think."

He strode out and Mark grinned unpleasantly. Eileen said suddenly, almost sharply:

"Stop looking so pleased with yourself! I don't blame him a bit! It—it was a crazy idea—"

"Look here, Eileen," said Mark with quiet emphasis, "don't you go getting crazy ideas about Kit Grant in that little taffy-colored head of yours. He's bad medicine for nice little girls like you—"

Eileen flung up her head with unexpected spirit. "Considering that you never set eyes on him in your life until yesterday, I don't know how you happen to be so wise!" she flamed indignantly.

Mark's eyebrows went up a little and he said mildly, though his eyes were angry, "I don't have to know a man a lifetime to be able to know that he's not what a girl like you should have!"

Eileen said nothing, and Mark, watching her, added quickly, "Come to think of it, you never set eyes on him yourself until yesterday. How comes it you're so wrought up over him?"

"I'm *not* wrought up over him," Eileen protested furiously, her cheeks quite pink.

"Then what's all the battle about?"

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She went quietly out and closed the door behind her. Caroline was fu-

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rious. But, after all, she had to admit that the woman was right; she shouldn't have invited guests without first speaking to Mrs. Grable.

But having the Bardeleben in the house, giving Isabel a chance to build on the instant attraction she had seen in his eyes, had seemed so terribly important that she hadn't been able to withhold the invitations. Caroline's heart ached over her child who had had to endure so many snubs and make shifts and who now must have her chance with DeBardeleben, at no matter what cost to her mother. Nor to anyone else who got in her way, thought Caroline grimly, as she prepared to go down to welcome the guests on their arrival.

Eileen, in a simple blue frock, and Mark, looking big and attractive, despite the fact that he lacked Kit's lean, distingu'shed good looks, were in the drawing-room, waiting the dinner call when Caroline came down. She had all but forgotten their presence. She wished that she dared ask them to dine upstairs in their own rooms, so that she and Isabel might monopolize the coming party. But she couldn't quite risk that, and so she said curtly, "Isabel and I have some guests coming to dinner. They should be here any moment now. Isn't that a car in the drive?"

Mark quirked an eyebrow humorously at Eileen who smiled back at him shyly as Caroline turned towards the door.

"You don't think, by any chance, that she's discovered the joint already belongs to herself and the lovely Isabel, do you?" murmured Mark.

There was the ghost of a shadow on Eileen's face as she looked swiftly about the stately old room. "I almost hope not—they'll want to remodel."

The next moment there were voices in the hall and then Caroline was coming into the room, with Pat DeBardeleben, tall and very good-looking in a crisp white linen mess-jacket, walking beside her. There was another man and two women—one young and fluffy and pretty in a white frock; the other older, more sophisticated in black lace with pearls about her slim throat and gardenias in her dusky hair.

PAT'S EYES lit up appreciatively as he saw Eileen. When the introductions were over, he was beside her, looking down at her, saying pleasantly, "You weren't swimming today. I'd have remembered you."

Eileen laughed and shook her head. "No, I was working in the garden."

Pat chuckled. "Wearing an enormous and very becoming picture hat, carrying a basket and with gloved hands snipping a blossom or two here and there," he mocked her.

Eileen laughed and colored a little. "I was down on my knees setting out strawberry plants," she informed him, "and forgot all about wearing gloves. I don't dare show my hands. Mr. Bowan said I had 'a green thumb'."

"Mr. Bowan? 'A green thumb'? asked Pat, grinning, his eyes warm and interested.

"Mr. Bowan is the gardener," said Eileen promptly. "And having a green thumb is a great compliment. Mr. Bowan said it was an Irish way of saying that anything you plant will grow and thrive."

"Oh, so that's it! This Bowan sounds a man of parts."

"He's absolutely fascinating," said Eileen eagerly. "He tells stories about Oleander Hall and the people who've lived here. There's a Ghost Walk, you know, that leads from the garden gate to the old family burying-ground. Superstitious people say that on moonlit nights the spirits of those who lived and loved in Oleander Hall walk the gardens again."

Pat bent his head and lowered his voice, his eyes a little teasing yet warm with admiration and liking, as he said confidentially, "After dinner there's sure to be a moon, and I've always yearned to see a ghost. Shall we have a try at it?"

Eileen's eyes sparkled. "I'd love it!" she answered.

That was the picture on which Isabel, exquisite in white lace, chanced as she stepped into the room, making her carefully-planned entrance, expecting to find Pat bored stiff and

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waiting anxiously for her. She stood quite still, framed between the mulberry brocade draperies in the doorway. For a moment the expression on her face and in her eyes was positively ugly. The next moment she had herself in hand and was strolling across the room, greeting the other guests, apparently oblivious to Pat and Eileen.

Watching her, Pat said under his breath, "Lord, what a beauty!"

"Isn't she?" said Eileen with honest enthusiasm. "I think she's the loveliest person I've ever seen."

Looking down at her face, Pat knew that she really meant that simple speech; that there was, back of her artless words, no reservation, no faintly catty tinge.

"What do you do with yourself, Sutton," demanded Pat unexpectedly, "when you are not at Oleander Hall? I mean it's incredible we've never met before."

Eileen laughed with gentle derision. "I work in an office, and it's not at all likely that we'll ever meet again, Mr. DeBardeleben."

"Now that is a statement I make bold to challenge," said Pat firmly. "And my friends never bother themselves with my top-heavy name. They just content themselves with Pat and let it go at that."

"Oh," said Isabel, who had come up behind them, "there you are, Pat. I was beginning to be afraid you'd forgotten all about our asking you to dinner."

"But how could I have forgotten," Pat protested, bending above her, his eyes caressing her, "when there's been nothing in my mind since you asked me, save that?"

Eileen caught her breath. His tone was exactly that in which he had spoken to her. His manner and his voice were turned off and on automatically, she told herself, as was his charm. And she felt a little sick and hot with shame that even for a moment she could have believed him in earnest and have been stirred by his good looks and his charm.

SHE SLIPPED away and found herself near Mark who turned to greet her, grinning a little. "Oh, hello," said Mark. "Are you a fugitive, too? If I knew there was a hamburger joint somewhere in the neighborhood, I'd invite you out to eat with me. A social atmosphere a trifle too rarefied, or something."

Eileen said eagerly, in the tone of a conspirator, "There *is* a hamburger joint—at least, it's called the Guale Tea Shoppe—over on the Causeway Road. Maybe they'd let us have a car?"

"Maybe? You mean certainly!" said Mark firmly. "Meet me on the veranda in five minutes."

Eileen looked uncertainly at Caroline and Isabel and Kit, who were talking and laughing with the others. They were all oblivious to Mark and Eileen, yet Eileen said hesitantly, "You don't think it would be rude?"

"Possibly—but who cares?" demanded Mark, and drew her with him out of the room. Neither of them knew that Caroline and Isabel had seen them go and that they had exchanged satisfied glances as the sound of the station-wagon floated back from the drive.

The road was narrow but paved. It ran between rows of ancient oaks curtained with moss which stirred faintly in the ocean breeze, and beneath the magic of the moonlight, was like ghostly shapes doing a weird dance.

The little tea-house was a small white cottage perched at the end of the causeway near the road to Guale. The house faced the road, but the screened-in back porch where meals were served looked out over the great marsh which had witnessed one of the bloodiest battles of the Revolution and so was known, inevitably, as the Battle of Bloody Marsh.

Seated at a small white table, lighted by a shaded lamp in the center, the middle-aged proprietress having taken their order, Mark looked across at Eileen and said cheerfully, "Well, now that you've grubbed in the soil of Oleander Hall and learned a few

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of its traditions, what do you think of it?"

"I love it," said Eileen simply. "Don't you?"

Mark nodded, entirely serious. "I can understand how a fellow would get his roots deep in the soil of the place and refuse to be taken away even when he dies," he admitted. "There's a part of it that could be drained and turned into a perfectly swell experimental tract. I've a hunch you could grow citrus fruits in it, and I know it would be swell for celery and lettuce make—a fine money crop."

The woman came back with their soup. "You are at Oleander, aren't you?" she asked. "We've all been so interested to know who was going to live there. We do so hope it will be someone who will carry on Mr. Halsted's plans."

"Did you know Mr. Halsted?" asked Mark curiously. "What was he like?"

"A very odd gentleman," answered the woman slowly and carefully, not quite meeting their eager, interested eyes. "No one knew him very well, except the servants at Oleander, who adored him. He was almost a hermit. At least he refused to meet callers and rarely ever left the place. Yet when the Woman's Club approached him last year and asked him to permit the gardens of Oleander to be opened to the public during the Garden Pilgrimage, he assented."

"And when the Pilgrimage took place, was Mr. Halsted on hand to receive his guests?" asked Mark.

"Good heavens, no!" answered the woman laughing. "He left the day before the opening and didn't come back until it was all over. But the Club made a lot of extra money by showing the gardens, and when he came home he sent them an additional check."

"So he was eccentric—but regular!" commented Mark.

"That's about what my son says," agreed the woman, smiling. "But I do hope that someone comes to live at Oleander who'll appreciate it. It's such a lovely place."

"The more I hear of Mr. Halsted," said Mark when she had gone away with their soup plates, "the more I feel he is a gentleman I should have liked very much to know."

Chapter Five

MEANWHILE, back at Oleander, dinner was being served and Isabel, Caroline and Kit were graciously doing the honors as though the place already belonged to them. Pat was making his interest in Isabel flatteringly plain and Caroline was beaming. Kit had discovered that the sophisticated woman in black lace, to whom he had been attracted at first, was merely the social sponsor of the rather dumpy little girl in white silk. He had gracefully and not too obviously transferred his attentions to the girl while the older women, chagrined but understanding, devoted herself to an excellent, if surprisingly simple, dinner.

Caroline, noting the food that was being served, all but ground her teeth in rage even while she was apparently charmed by the conversation of her dinner partner. The food was delicious and it was ample; but it was simple to the point of being completely banal. She promised herself that tomorrow she would certainly have Mrs. Grable on the carpet for a session that would leave no doubt in the housekeeper's mind that Caroline was accustomed to better attention to her orders.

When dinner was over and the guests had gone into the drawing-room, the servants made short shift of clearing the table. In the kitchen the entire staff was working swiftly, and it was plain that there was something in the air. The moment the last dish had been wiped and put away, the final preparations made for breakfast in the morning, the lights were switched out and the servants hurried out into the beauty of the moon-silvered night.

As the door closed behind them, a bell jangled from the living-room.

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For a moment the butler hesitated, his dark face growing mutinous.

"Wonder what do dat lady want now?" he complained to his wife, the ample and expert cook.

"What yo' care what she want, man? Us is got business to 'tend to," snapped Aunt Callie and hurried off down the path behind the others. "If yo' want company when yo' passes de Ghost Walk yo' better take yo' foot in yo' hand and travel! Ain't nobody gwine wait for yo'."

And her husband followed her and the others, already dim shapes flitting ahead down the path that led from the service-quarters of Oleander to the long double row of houses several hundred yards away. There were twenty-four of them; substantial, comfortable two room cabins of tabby-brick with lean-to kitchens at the back. There were tall trees bordering the path and behind the ink-black shadows the little cabins dreamed in perfect stillness.

At the very end of the row, there was a larger cabin intended for the overseer. It occupied a neat little garden space behind a picket fence and had been freshly whitewashed. A light glowed behind the closed shutters of one front window and the servants turned in at the open gate.

Bowan greeted them, smiling, pleasant, ushering them into the cabin, closing the door behind the last of them. He waved Mrs. Grable to a chair beside the fireplace. The others stood about the room and Bowan took his place behind the plain pine table on which lay a note-book and a fountain pen.

"Are we ready?" he said quietly. Then, to Mrs. Grable, "You may begin, please."

Mrs. Grable folded her hands in her lap and said quietly, "I'll have to admit at the very beginning that I do not like Mrs. Richardson or her daughter and so anything I may say about them will probably be prejudiced."

Bowan smiled faintly. "I've always found your judgment pretty sound, Mrs. Grable. Proceed."

"WELL, Mrs. Richardson invited guests for dinner tonight and they were very cross with me because we were not prepared for four additional guests," said Mrs. Grable. "I feel that this was an unwarranted imposition. Also, Mrs. Richardson and her daughter are making all sorts of plans about remodeling Oleander, in case they inherit."

Bowan straightened, his thick eyebrows coming together across his nose as he said sternly, quite sure he had not heard her correctly, "Remodel Oleander?"

"Remodel and modernize," said Mrs. Grable firmly.

Her voice had been quiet and noncommittal but all in the small room felt that they could hear Mrs. Richardson and Isabel planning the monstrous things Mrs. Grable suggested.

Bowan sat for a moment, completely still, looking down at the pad before him, his face set. When he looked up his gray eyes were cold, though his voice was quiet and controlled as he said crisply, "So much for the Richardsons. What's this Christopher Grant like? I've only caught a glimpse of him now and then."

"He's a very attractive young man with quite pleasant manners," said Mrs. Grable with the air of one trying very hard to be fair, "but I have to admit that I don't like him."

"Anything in particular?" asked Bowan, studying her keenly.

"Nothing—except that he's too smooth, said Mrs. Grable and smiled faintly, though her eyes were anxious.

Bowan nodded, smiling a little, and crossed out the notes he had taken. He looked about the room at the circle of faces and said quietly, "Anyone else have a report on Mr. Grant?"

The Negro butler stepped forward. "Last night, when Ah went downstairs to lock de front door Ah seed Marse Grant standin' on a chair in de front room. He was rubbin' his hands over dat picture—de one what Miss Sutton think look at her befo' dat," he offered.

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Bowan chuckled wryly. "That was very careless of me," he admitted. "I had no right to let my curiosity to see and hear them get the better of me. But I don't think they'll find anything wrong with the painting. Is Grant what you'd call a gentleman, Mose?"

The butler hesitated and then he said frankly, "No, suh—he ain't."

Bowan nodded and made a note in his book. "But we are all agreed that Mr. Hewes and Miss Sutton are people whom Mr. Halsted would have liked, aren't we?" he said.

There was a chorus of assent to which Bowan put an end when he said, still frowning a little, "There is only one drawback. Neither of them knows anything about handling a large estate or finances. We mustn't allow Oleander to become rundown, as it inevitably would if handled by inexpert hands."

Bowan looked suddenly stern and a little tired. "We will simply have to wait and bide our time and let things drift," he said quietly. "Let Oleander weave her spell over these people. If the Richardsons stay here a month and do not feel a tug at their hearts at the thought of going away, I'll be very much surprised. After all, we can't judge people we've known only a few days. We have to wait. Thirty days is a long time, sometimes—even in Eden."

* * *

THE HOUSE was set back from the highway, just where the road curved to span the long marsh, and was known to every school-child and student of history as the site of the Battle of Bloody Marsh. It was protected from prying eyes by shoulder-high growths of scrub-palmetto, and at back there were two or three tall palm trees growing at a forty-five degree angle, as though fighting to tear themselves away from the ceaseless battle with the ocean wind.

But of course, said most people, there was nobody in the old gray stone house to listen to the wind.

Lately, there were reports of flickering lights, of swiftly moving shadows that left no sound or sign of their passing, had increased. The stories spread and the people listened.

The story, of course, reached to Oleander Hall and enlivened a rather dull afternoon. Isabel and Caroline had spent most of the day in their room, bored, and admitting it frankly. Mark had been absent on affairs of his own and Eileen had been working happily in the garden, listening to Bowan's endless and marvelous stories. Kit had gone somewhere for a walk, after receiving a long-anticipated letter from a girl.

Isabel, half-lying on the window-seat, straightened suddenly and said, "Caroline, we're going to have callers. I hear a car in the drive."

"Perhaps it's Pat," exclaimed Caroline, rushing to the mirror and running swift tidying fingers over her hair.

"You know he won't be back until Saturday," said Isabel almost savagely, her attention centered on the drive below, along which they could hear a car laboring heavily. "It doesn't sound very exciting. A delivery truck, probably—no, it's a passenger car. But it's of the vintage of 1938—what a wreck! It must be a peddler—"

Caroline turned from the mirror as Isabel gave a little exclamation of annoyance.

"It's the parson calling, Caroline."

There was a knock at the door and the butler said formally, "De Reverend and his lady in de parlor."

"Yes, yes—we know. We're coming down," said Caroline curtly. She still hadn't forgiven the servants for deserting in a body on the night of her ill-fated dinner-party.

DOWNSTAIRS Caroline and Isabel found two stout, pleasant-looking elderly people awaiting them. The Vicar was portly, yet almost stately in his clerical black and white, his bald head shining. His blue eyes were friendly and genial, yet gave the feeling that they could be cold or flash like lightning if occasion demanded.

"Ah, good afternoon, my dear

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ladies," he said, shaking hands first with Caroline, and then with Isabel. "It's Mrs. Richardson and her daughter, Miss Isabel, I believe—yes, yes, of course. A very great pleasure to welcome you to our little community, but sorry to have been so tardy about it. My wife and I were away at a church meeting and only returned a few days ago."

He introduced his wife, who was cheerful, friendly and pleasant. There were glints of good humor in her brown eyes. They all settled down and the butler rolled in a tea-wagon which Caroline's swift eye saw was perfectly appointed. It made Caroline relax inwardly to see the heavy silver tea-service that must be very old and very valuable, the silver platter heaped with dainty sandwiches, the painted china plates laden with fresh cookies and cakes.

"I do hope, Mrs. Richardson," said the Vicar, "that you have suffered no inconvenience in regard to servants due to the new crop of haunted house stories?"

Caroline put down her tea-cup and stared at him. "Haunted house stories?" she repeated so dazedly that Mrs. Burgame made a little clicking sound and said, "Martin, you shouldn't have startled them. If they haven't heard the stories—"

"But what stories?" pleaded Caroline. "I must insist that you tell me, please!"

Obviously, the Vicar, whose pleasures were few and who adored telling stories to interested listeners, would be delighted. "Although of course there's absolutely nothing to it. It's simply some silly gossip or rumor. It concerns that big old deserted house at the edge of Bloody Marsh just where the road turns to pass the vicarage before it crosses the causeway to the beach. No one knows a great deal about the house except that it has been closed and unoccupied for years. But periodically stories abound that lights have been flickering about the house and that dark shadows flit about outside."

"What's your theory of the ghost stories, sir?" asked Caroline.

Obviously by the way he settled himself in his chair, she knew that this was a subject on which he liked to talk.

"My theory is that the whole thing is a fabricated plot by a group of racketeers that I am determined shall be kept clear of the islands at no matter what cost," he said.

"Racketeers?" repeated Isabel, and made not too much effort to conceal her amusement at the childish theory.

The Vicar studied her with a sudden intentness.

"My dear young lady," he said, unexpectedly mild and gentle, "what would you say if I told you that there is a syndicate trying now, in every known way of law, or lack of it, to put in a night-club near Fredericka?"

Isabel's pretty chin went up and her eyes chilled a little. "I'd say," she said frankly, "that I see no reason why there shouldn't be some sort of amusement. If you ask me, I think the islands are pretty deadly—at this time of the year, anyway."

The Vicar was studying her with a curious intentness. He smiled and said, "Ah, well, of course— If I've been rude, forgive a clumsy old man who meant no harm."

"Why," said Isabel to herself, "he's not a terror. He's—*sweet!*"

THERE WAS a breathless moment when she and the Vicar stared at each other as though they had just met and were going to have a chance to be friends all over again. But before either of them could speak Eileen entered the room. She was wearing a pink linen culotte dress, socks ending above her sun-browned, briar-scratched ankles, and comfortable rubber-soled sports shoes.

Abashed at the sight of visitors she stammered, "Oh—I'm sorry. I didn't know there were guests."

Caroline said almost curtly, "Come in, my dear. This is Dr. Burgame and Mrs. Burgame. Another of our little house-party, Eileen Sutton," she presented Eileen almost as though she disliked the girl.

Eileen accepted a cup of tea and a

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sandwich and retired to a window-seat to eat it. Watching her unobtrusively, because he was fond of all young things and because she had suddenly come into the room like a breath of the sweet spring air outside, the old Vicar realized that she was watching for something or somebody. And suddenly he saw her face light up with an eager little smile as he heard footsteps on the graveled drive and a gay tune being whistled slightly off-key. He turned with genuine interest to see the tall young man in careless gray flannel and battered yet immaculately clean green sweater who came swinging into the room, acknowledging introductions with a breezy cheerfulness and a friendly courtesy in his manner that both the elderly people found quite pleasant.

"So you're Mark Hewes," said the Vicar and saw that while Eileen had apparently taken no notice of his entrance, she was actually vibrantly alive with the very thought that he was in the room. Yet when Mark glanced towards Eileen she seemed entirely lost to all that was going on in the room, and he spoke to her twice before she gave a little start and turned swiftly.

"Yes, Mark? I'm sorry," she said. "What were you saying?"

"Only that I believe it's going to be absurdly easy to clear about forty acres of muck-land—it's really swamp now, but by clearing it you could have an experimental station. Raise all sorts of trick vegetables heretofore impossible about the place."

"Sounds like fun," said Eileen eagerly.

"Almost as good as building a bridge or cutting a railroad somewhere," said Mark wistfully. "Only, of course—it's just a dream."

"If you can add forty productive acres to the property of Oleander Hall, young man, I should say it should be made into something much more substantial than a dream," said the Vicar with his usual enthusiastic force of speech. "I knew Kirk Halsted. Not well, of course. I doubt if anyone ever came to know him very well. And what I know of him tells me he would welcome any such plan as you have in mind—if it's practical, of course."

"Oh, it's practical enough," admitted Mark and grinned a trifle wryly. "Only it would call for an additional outlay of twenty-five thousand or so to begin the job and carry it through."

"Then why don't you take it up with the Halsted attorneys on the mainland? They are good men and wise. I'm sure they would gladly invest that amount of the estate in something that is destined to profit the plantation," suggested the Vicar.

"I forbid you even to see the lawyers on such a crackbrained scheme, Mark Hewes," said Caroline with cold fury.

There was a moment of silence and then Mark said, his jaw set and hard, "May I ask why you should be so concerned, Mrs. Richardson? If they wish to advance the sum—"

"If they do, it will be deducted from the estate in the final accounting when an allotment of the property has been made," said Caroline harshly. "And until that decision has been made I forbid you even to mention the matter to them."

"You forbid me?" Mark repeated as though not quite sure that he had heard her correctly.

"I forbid you—as guardian for my child in her share of the estate. It may all be yours some day and then you can play ducks and drakes with it if you want to," snapped Caroline. "But until the place has been given to you, neither you nor anyone else of the four—even Isabel herself—has any right to work out any schemes to try to get your hands on any share of the estate whatever. Do I make myself clear?"

"You do, indeed, Mrs. Richardson—how painfully clear!" said Mark with deceptive mildness. "In fact, so very clear that I shall be forced, in tribute to my self-respect to go over in the morning to see the lawyers. I can't permit myself to be dictated to, my dear Mrs. Richardson—not even by so charming and so fair-minded a lady as yourself."

Through a dead silence he walked to the door, turned, spoke gracefully

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to the Vicar, said good-by to Mrs. Burgame, lifted his hand in a little salute to Eileen, and was gone.

"Well, well," said the Vicar, breaking the silence that had followed Mark's departure. "My dear, we really must be going. It's getting quite late."

He stood up, made a graceful speech in which he thanked Caroline and Isabel for a most pleasant visit, said something friendly and gracious to Eileen, and they took themselves off.

"Mother, how could you have made such a fool of yourself?" blazed Isabel the moment the door closed behind the Vicar and his wife. Even Eileen knew, by now, that only when she was utterly furious with her mother did Isabel call her by that name; preferring the more youthful "Caroline" in times of peace.

"I can't see that it was anything disgraceful that I did," said Caroline haughtily. "I simply forbade that ridiculous boy to attempt any schemes to rob the estate—"

"Which was a great waste of time, Mrs. Richardson," Eileen spoke up unexpectedly. "Because of all the people in this house, Mark is probably the one least interested in the money. And he's by far the most honest of all of us."

And because never in her life had she spoken in such a tone to so haughty a being as Caroline, she was promptly overcome with confusion and fled to her own room to hide her amazement at her own courage.

Chapter Six

DINNER was eaten in strained silence. Kit was abstracted, obviously unhappy, his thoughts miles away. Mark ate grimly, his appetite unimpaired but his manner pugnacious, as though he dared anyone to address an unnecessary word to him. Caroline and Isabel had quarreled violently in their own room and Caroline was pink-eyed, her lips quivering, Isabel very cold and self-contained. Eileen sat huddled in her chair as though she seriously hoped that nobody would remember she was there. The only sounds were of voices saying quietly, "No, thank you," to the hovering butler as he went about the table passing the food.

They were all glad when dinner was over and they were free to escape their several ways. Kit vanished to his room without a word of explanation or apology to anybody; Isabel and Caroline went into the living-room, armed themselves with books and sat down in haughty silence. Mark had gone straight from the dining-table to the garden.

It was there that Eileen found him a little later. He was sitting on the top of the low fieldstone wall at the foot of the garden near the beginning of the Ghost Walk. He sat with his knees drawn up, encircled by his arms and his chin rested on his knees. The moon was round and brilliantly white so that the thick silver-gilt moonlight looked as though it had been poured on the dreaming garden and the stately old trees. The Spanish moss swayed in the breeze and there was an unearthly quiet about the night that made Eileen shiver as she sped down the path through the garden.

But all she could find to say was "Hello."

Mark eyed her briefly, said an ungracious "Hello!" and was silent.

"Would you rather I went away?" suggested Eileen.

Mark had the grace to grin at that. "Oh, no," he answered with a regal gesture. "Stay as long as you like—only don't try to take any of it away with you."

Eileen giggled. "I won't," she promised. "But I honestly don't think she meant—"

Mark turned upon her furiously. "So help me, if you go into a Pollyanna act, I'll spank you!" he warned her. "I came out here to hate the Richardson dame and I don't intend to be swerved from my purpose."

"Who's trying to swerve you?" demanded Eileen. "I came out to help you hate. What will we hate first?"

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"Everything about her from the fact that she really exists to the fact that she is really here and there's only one thing I can do about it," stated Mark angrily.

Even before she spoke Eileen's heart did a nose-dive but her voice was remarkably steady when she said with every manifestation of polite interest, "Such as what, for instance?"

"Such as packing up my traps and shaking the dust of Oleander Hall off my scuffed boots," said Mark. "Which is exactly what I'm going to do. Tomorrow."

"Oh, Mark—no!" she protested in honest distress.

"Why not?"

"But you'll be throwing away your chances, Mark. How do you know you won't inherit?" demanded Eileen, fighting her tears, knowing suddenly that if Mark went, her interest in the lovely old place and her happiness would go along with him.

"Look here, Eileen, just what chance do you think a couple of saps like you and me have against three wise guys like the Richardson dame and that Grant? They not only know all the answers—they wrote some of the questions! But the chances are a hundred to one he will find it—and when he does, you and I will be out on our ears and Grant or the Richardson girl will be in possession."

It had, even to Eileen's unskilled, unwise ears, a terribly convincing sound. She drew a long hard breath as she turned and looked back up the garden path; the gardenia bushes, the roses, the azaleas aflame beneath the soft liquid white of the moonlight; the beds of stock sending out their cool, exquisite fragrance in the moonlight; tall bells of snapdragons outlined against the velvet-blackness of the hedge beyond. The old sundial with its brave legend, "*I count only the sunny hours*".

SUDDENLY as her eyes roved the place Eileen knew that tears were slipping down her cheeks and Mark said, his voice caught with sharp concern, "Darling! You're crying! What is it?"

She caught her breath and was still for a long moment. He had called her "darling!" And in a tone that said he meant it. There wasn't anything she could say for answer. She was speechless, breathless. Suddenly Mark's arm was about her and Mark was drawing her close to him, his cheek against the soft mass of her curls and he was saying huskily, "Because you *are* a darling, you know. Of course, you're an awful little nut sometimes and I've got my work cut out for me trying to put some backbone and spunk into you. But maybe I can manage—" And then before the soft magic of her there close in his arm, his teasing mood vanished. His voice deepened and he said very low as his lips found and claimed hers, "Oh, my dearest—darling. I—do love you so terribly."

They were so enraptured in the glory of that moment, so utterly enchanted by this grave new world in which only two people existed that they did not hear the faint rustle in the shrubbery of the Ghost Walk or see a dark shadow that slid out of the darkness of the hedge and was gone.

It was quite late before they realized the passing of time. A little abashed for fear of being scolded by Mrs. Richardson, they went back to the house. To their relief, Isabel and her mother had gone to bed and only Kit was in the library. As he heard their voices on the terrace he cautiously slid an old paper-bound book he had been reading beneath the cover of a copy of a popular magazine. He seemed quite absorbed in the magazine when Eileen and Mark came in, their secret written large on their happy faces.

"For all the world," said Kit to himself in amused disgust, "like kids caught in the jam closet. So they're in love, eh? Now, I wonder if that should be permitted!"

And long after they had gone upstairs, he sat on, staring into space, his handsome brows drawn together in a frown of concentration.

Meanwhile, Eileen was standing at

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her window, looking out into the mellow beauty of the night, when there was a soft knock at her door and she hurried to open it. Mark stood there and Eileen said in quick, sharp alarm, "Mark! What is it?"

Mark stepped inside the door, closed it behind him and handed her a typewritten slip. "I found it on my dresser when I came up just now," he said.

The slip read: *Don't go away. You have the same chance as all the others. Don't throw it away.*

There was no signature. The letters were capitals, and there were no peculiarities about them to distinguish the writing from that of any machine in the world.

"But—how did it get there? I mean—who do you suppose wrote it?" Eileen stammered.

Mark lifted his shoulders and spread his hands in a gesture of complete ignorance. "What gets me," he confessed, "is how the deuce anybody knew that I even thought of leaving. I haven't whispered a word to a soul about it except when I spoke to you out there in the garden just now."

She crept closer to him and Mark put his arms about her. For a moment they clung to each other and then Eileen said shakily, "But you've changed your mind, now? You're not going away now?"

"Not until our month is up, darling," said Mark and kissed her. "And then I've to get busy and find a job to support my wife."

The word had an exquisite thrill to it. Then Mark made himself let her go and said, "Well, I'll dash along now. Maybe I shouldn't have brought that note to show it to you. I don't want to upset you, only it seemed so darned *queer!*"

Eileen shivered and looked at the paper with repulsion as Mark took it and thrust it into his pocket.

"You *will* be careful, won't you, darling?" she pleaded.

"Yes, ma'am—I promise, cross my heart," said Mark as he left the room.

It was a long time before either of them went to sleep.

IT WAS lunch-time the next day before the entire party assembled together and Mark broke the news to them. "Eileen and I are going over to see the Vicar this afternoon about our marriage. We are going to be married immediately."

There was a moment's silence and then Caroline said, her eyes blazing, "I don't think that should be permitted."

Mark stared at her as though he thought she had lost her mind. Permitted?" he demanded incredulously. "Well, who'd got the right to permit—or refuse to? It's a matter between Eileen and myself—not with anybody else. Who's going to stop us?"

Caroline said stubbornly, "It will give you two chances to our one of inheriting—you and Eileen are pooling your interests in the inheritance."

Mark stared again and then his eyebrows went up and he gave a snort of disgust. But before he could explode into speech Kit said in his usual bored drawl, "I think she's right, old man. I don't think your marriage should be permitted until after the end of the month."

"Oh, so you're sticking in your two cents' worth, too, are you, Grant?" blazed Mark with honest relief that he could address himself to a man now and not to a woman whom his code said he could not strike, no matter what the provocation. "And who's going to stop us, if I may ask?"

Kit's glance flickered over him and Kit said coolly, "I'm not suggesting fisticuffs, old thing, if that's what's on your belligerent mind. All I'm suggesting is that we give the good old lawyers a buzz and find out how they stand on the matter of two of the contestants pooling their chances in marriage."

Mark, still holding Eileen's hand, looked from one to the other about the table and then he sighed and shook his head. "The whole outfit" —he spoke aloud to no one in particular and in a tone that was more one of sorrow than of anger—"is completely balmy. You are completely

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hipped, the whole lot of you, on this inheritance thing. You'd think that those of us who didn't inherit were going to be marched straight off to a firing squad and shot down like so many political offenders."

He was, suddenly, almost violent. "Hang it, did it ever occur to you that Eileen and I are marrying because we are in love—and not because we care two hoots about inheriting? I can make a living for my wife, without bending and twisting and warping my whole life and my outlook in the world, just to inherit a place like this and a few measly dollars."

Caroline all but pounced on him like a hungry bird on an unwary insect.

"Then does that mean you're giving up your chance of inheriting—yours and Eileen's?" she demanded eagerly.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Mark returned. "Because then your daughter and Kit would make up a nice little match of it and be absolutely dead-certain of having the place and the million. Well, I'm sorry to spoil your little picture. But Eileen and I are not giving up a thing—except being single, which isn't a lot of fun, anyway. Besides, here's something that might interest you all. I found it on my dresser when I went up to bed last night."

Caroline snatched the typed bit of paper and read it with wide, frowning eyes. Isabel took it from her, read it and passed it on to Kit. And Kit, with a curious, secret look far back in his eyes said quietly, "Oh, then you had had some idea of going away, Hewes?"

"A vague idea," Mark acknowledged. "Quite vague, in fact. I merely mentioned it to Eileen last night at the foot of the garden. Not another living soul knew that I had ever considered such an act. And then when I went to my room—"

Isabel said sweetly, "Don't you use the typewriter, Eileen?"

"Yes," answered Eileen and saw the cynical smile in Isabel's eyes. "But I didn't write that to keep Mark from going away, if that's what you are suggesting. I don't know anything about it."

KIT SAID, above Isabel's and Caroline's derisive smiles, "Where were you, Hewes, when you made the confession to Eileen that you were thinking of leaving?"

"At the garden wall," answered Mark.

"Near the beginning of the Ghost Walk?"

"Yes," answered Mark, puzzled. "Why?"

"Did you hear a sound in the shrubbery or see anyone near you there?" demanded Kit. Now the others were watching Kit, suddenly tense, sensing something under the surface of his casual, politely interested words.

"No, not a sound," answered Mark, still more puzzled. "And the only thing I saw moving was the Spanish moss."

"You're quite sure that it *was* the moss? Nothing else?" asked Kit.

"For Heaven's sake, Kit, what are you getting at?" snapped Isabel.

"I'm only trying to point out that someone might easily have been concealed in the shrubbery at the edge of the Ghost Walk and have heard Mark's confession to Eileen," answered Kit.

"And then raced back here, wrote that paper on the typewriter and took it to Mark's room?" demanded Isabel. "But, for Pete's sake, *why?*"

Kit shrugged and raised his eyebrows humorously. "But why any of the crazy, cockeyed, entirely fantastic things that have happened around here from the very beginning?" he demanded with a disarming grin. "After all, our being here, for the reason we are here, is fantastic. And nothing that has happened since has made the slightest degree of sense."

He looked from one to the other and then he said coolly, "I hadn't quite made up my mind whether to relate my own small nocturnal adventure or not. But I suppose I might as well. There's really no point in our holding things back from each other."

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"What happened?" demanded Caroline.

"I've seen a ghost," announced Kit.

There was a short silence and then a hubbub of protest.

"A ghost? Nonsense!"

"Kit, you're not being very funny!"

"What do you mean—a ghost?"

"What was it like?"

Kit raised his hands in a little gesture that begged for silence. "One at a time, please! It *was* a ghost. I assure you of that most firmly. I can't tell you how I know—I can only tell you that as I stood face to face with it, a wind blew across me that had the chill of the grave in it—I'm not kidding!"

Eileen shivered and Mark's hand closed more warmly over hers. Isabel was watching Kit with amused eyes and she drawled carelessly, "Of course it was an incredibly lovely woman in flowing white garments, perhaps with an armful of funeral flowers, or a lantern—or even a key?"

"It was a little bent old man," said Kit. Aside, to Isabel, he added good-humoredly, "Sorry to be unromantic. I admit frankly I would have preferred the lovely lady. But I have to tell the truth. He was incredibly old and he had a beard and his clothes were of an ancient cut and made of some dark, thick-looking stuff that looked as though it had been clumsily tailored. He was standing on the steps of the Halsted vault, his head bent as though he were listening. And then suddenly he looked up and saw me. The next moment he was pouring like smoke through the grilled door of the vault and that was the last I saw of him."

Eileen shivered and Mark said curtly, "Easy, Kit—do you want to scare Eileen to death?"

"Eileen shouldn't be so easily frightened," drawled Isabel. "Now if I meet a ghost here—and my whole month is going to be spoiled if I don't—I shall insist that he be something rather special; perhaps a Cavalier, in satin pants and a brocade waistcoat with jeweled buttons and lace ruffles about his wrists, and a sword on his hip. He must be graceful and courtly and instead of turning into smoke and vanishing, I insist he stay and talk to me."

Caroline said briskly, "Well, if I meet a ghost at Oleander—and believe me, I sincerely hope that I do *not!*—I want it to be at high noon on the terrace where there's plenty of sunlight. I prefer my ghosts in the daytime."

"I believe Mr. Grant saw a ghost and that it was the ghost of Mr. Halsted," Eileen said quietly.

Isabel laughed. "Oh, I believe Mr. Grant saw a ghost, too—but I think it was one of the Seven Dwarfs, hunting for Snow White. Come on, Kit, let's go for a swim. And you must tell me more about your lovely ghost."

"He wasn't lovely at all," said Kit. "And you can laugh all you like—but I know what I saw. And I know, too, that hereafter I shall most certainly avoid the Ghost Walk like a plague!"

"And so shall I!" said Caroline. "All those dark old trees should be cut down."

The butler said very quietly behind her, "Will that be all, madam?"

Caroline said carelessly as she rose, and did not see the man's look, "That's all."

Chapter Seven

DINNER, that evening, was anxious, and all were glad when it was over. A few minutes after they had moved into the drawing-room and coffee had been served, there was the sound of a car in the drive. There was a murmur of voices at the door and then the butler came to the drawing-room door and said stiffly, "Mr. Grant, sir, a young lady to see you."

Before Kit could speak there were the tap-taps of high heeled slippers in the hall and a pretty girl in inexpensive and quite new black appeared in the doorway. Her face wore signs of recent grief, but her manner was composed as she said

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quietly, "It's Marcia, Kit—do you mind?"

Kit stared at her as though he thought her a visitor from another world. He could only stand quite still and stare at her dumbfounded. Marcia caught her breath on a strangled cry and said:

"Please don't look so terrified, Kit. I only dropped in to say hello. I'm going on immediately. But I happened to remember you were here—" Her brave pretense that everything was well broke down suddenly and she turned away, hiding her face in her hands.

"Marcia, darling," said Kit, contrite and concerned as he leaped to her side, caught her in his arms and held her close against him. "Dearest, it was only that you took me so completely by surprise. You—well, I couldn't believe it was really you. I *am* glad to see you, darling."

And there was so much tenderness, such sincerity in his voice that the tears vanished and she smiled mistily up at him as she wiped her eyes and said, "Are you, Kit? Then I'm glad I came."

Kit turned, his arm still about her, to face the others and they saw that suddenly he looked years younger, his eyes alight as he said, "May I present Miss Wilcox, my fiancee? Darling, this is Mrs. Richardson. And Miss Richardson, Miss Sutton and Mr. Hewes."

Marcia's dark eyes greeted them all as she acknowledged the introduction and then she said eagerly, "You are the contestants? I think it's fascinating."

Caroline looked silently derisive. Isabel studied Marcia's cheap black frock and thin coat, the wide-brimmed black hat and the black shoes, and lost interest. Eileen smiled at her with a shy, almost tender sympathy and suddenly Marcia no longer felt like a stranger.

Kit drew her to the far end of the room, where he took off her hat and coat and questioned her. She made a little gesture that took in the black dress and accessories and said, "For Dad. I'm—all alone now, Kit."

"My darling," said Kit and his arms tightened about her.

"So when I started out to Norfolk for that job as technician that Dr. Mowberly offered me, I discovered—no, darling, I won't lie to you! I deliberately routed myself so that I could come by here and see you for a few minutes. I've got the taxi waiting and I make connection with my train in an hour and twenty minutes."

Kit stood up and, with his arm about Marcia, drew her out of the room and to the dining-room where Mrs. Grable stood waiting to welcome the girl. One glance at Marcia and Mrs. Grable approved of her as she had never approved of Caroline or Isabel.

"I'm having one of the maids take your baggage up to a guest-room, Miss Wilcox," said Mrs. Grable. "I'm sure you'll be quite comfortable."

"Oh, you're terribly kind," protested Marcia, scarlet, "but I only stopped to say hello to Kit—why, my taxi is still waiting."

MRS. GRABLE chuckled. "Oh, no it isn't, my dear! I paid it off and sent it away. You must stay a few days anyway. Mr. Halsted would never forgive us if we let you go away without having a chance to see Oleander—we think it's very well worth seeing. And there is so much room. Besides, this young man of yours has been pretty lonely here."

Marcia looked at Kit with swimming eyes and put out her hand, palm upward, so that he laid his hand on it and held it close and hard. "Have you, darling?" she asked very low. "I've missed you, too. Even though I don't see you for months at a time—"

"Darling, would you be willing to marry me and struggle along on this pitiful little tuppence a year of mine?" asked Kit rashly.

Marcia's eyes were misted with tears in which there was no faint trace of bitterness. "Dad and I have managed for years on twelve hundred a year," she pointed out quietly.

"And you think you and I could? On two thousand?" asked Kit wistfully.

Marcia was very still for a long moment. And then she freed her hand from his clasp and turned her head away. "No, darling, you and I

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couldn't. Because money and the things money will buy are so terribly important to you. They're not a bit to me—but then I've never had any, so how could I expect to know whether it's important or not? Anyway, let's not talk about it tonight. Let's wait for daylight for such a solemn discussion. Right now the only thing that seems at all important to me is that you and I are together. And that's enough for one night. I've been so lonely, darling."

Kit lifted her hand and kissed each small fingertip separately. "I'll be lonely," he told her, "the longest day of my life until you are mine and I know that I shall never have to say good-bye to you again. May that day come soon, little beloved."

"May it come soon, darling!" said Marcia huskily and kissed his temple just where the hair grew back from his forehead.

IN THE MORNING no one offered any objection to the announcement that Marcia would stay on a few days. Isabel and Caroline merely exchanged significant glances which Kit intercepted coldly and returned in kind. Eileen and Mark were quite frankly delighted. When Marcia offered some half-hearted protest that she couldn't impose, Mrs. Grable, to Caroline's sniff of disgust, assumed the manner of a hostess and insisted that there was plenty of room; that they would be delighted to have Marcia and that it would be cruel for her to rush off now, leaving Kit before they had had any sort of a visit.

Eileen welcomed Marcia shyly but warmly and showed her about the garden. To her intense delight she discovered that Marcia loved growing things and that she knew some of the fundamentals of gardening. Kit hovered about Marcia, his eyes fixed on her as though he filled a little of the emptiness of his hungry heart with the sight of her here beside him even for just this little while.

On the terrace in the late afternoon Caroline was idling in a basket-chair, awaiting the return of Isabel who had driven over to Guale for a swim. Kit came out, dressed for dinner, and Caroline said pleasantly, "Sit down, won't you, Kit? The girls will be down in a little while."

Kit, unwilling to have a tete-a-tete with her, yet not quite certain how he might gracefully avoid one, drew a chair forward and dropped his long length into it. Caroline assured him that she didn't in the least mind his pipe and Kit gratefully filled it and lit it.

"I was quite surprised to find you were engaged, Kit," drawled Caroline after a moment, her voice careless, her eyes on the knitting in her hands. "Funny, I had an idea you intended to play up either to Eileen or to Isabel, in the hope of increasing your chances at the legacy."

Kit's jaw set hard and after a pause he said, "Was it as plain as all that?"

Caroline laughed, a light, soft laugh. "Oh, dear me, no—you were not obvious about it at all," she answered promptly. "In fact, I doubt if it would ever have occurred to me—except that I reasoned that if I were a young man faced with the position you are in, that's what I would have done. But then, I suppose you'll scold me and tell me I have no soul for romance."

"No," Kit returned grimly. "It's I who have no soul for romance. Never have had. And I admit that I had some such idea as you mention about—well, increasing my chances for collecting the legacy. Only—the two girls showed me almost at once that there wasn't a chance for me. Eileen simply went heels over head over Hewes at first meeting, and there was scarcely a splash when Isabel went under about DeBardeleben. So—" He shrugged and waved his pipe in a careless gesture.

Caroline bent her head above her knitting and said coolly, "I'm quite sure there is no definite understanding between Isabel and Pat DeBardeleben. As a matter of fact, I understand he's as good as engaged to another girl."

Kit knocked out his pipe and looked narrowly at Caroline who pretended a vast absorption in her knitting. She did not look up or meet his eyes. Though Kit stared at her so hard she

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all but felt the impact of his question. And then he said curtly, "You and Isabel have discussed this?"

Caroline flung up her head with a sudden avoidance of any further evasion.

"And why should we not?" she demanded harshly. "This is Isabel's chance to get something out of her life. If Isabel does not inherit Oleander—well, it's the end for both of us. I don't quite know what will become of us. Now do you wonder why she and I are willing to stop at nothing to guarantee her inheritance of at least a half of the estate?"

"Since my own position is pretty much the same, I don't wonder at all," said Kit. "In fact, I'm more than willing to meet you halfway on any reasonable plan that will guarantee Isabel and me an equal share in the distribution."

"Good!" exclaimed Caroline. "I felt certain you would be sensible about it. After all, you know, marriage is not a life and death proposition any more. Once the estate has been settled and division made, there is no reason at all why a nice, quite, well-managed divorce shouldn't take place immediately."

There were light footsteps on the stairs. Eileen and Marcia were coming down to dinner. Kit, rising bowed low over Caroline's hand and said, his voice suave yet somehow carrying a sting, "My dear Caroline, you are, indeed, a most remarkable woman."

AND WHILE such affairs were going on at Oleander Hall, the Vicar was pottering about in his study, getting his notes ready for his sermon the following Sunday. He was flushed with triumph and the feeling of success because he had that day finally defeated the move to establish a night-club on the Fredericka Road and felt that he had done a service to the land that he loved dearly and whose Vicar he had been for eleven years.

"You're tired, dear," said Mrs. Burgame as she came to the door of the study. "Can't you put that off until tomorrow?"

"No, dear, I'm afraid I can't," answered the Vicar happily. "I want to jot down some notes that came to me while I was making my speech today. It's going to be a good sermon on Sunday, my dear—words of the good Lord."

Mrs. Burgame kissed his forehead lightly, said, "Don't stay up too late, dear. There's a glass of milk and some sandwiches on a tray in the kitchen if you get hungry."

"Yes, yes, my dear—thank you," said the Vicar absently and was lost in his notes before his wife's footsteps had died away on the stairs.

Silence settled down on the Vicarage. Silence broken only by the sounds so accustomed that the Vicar had long ago ceased to hear them; the pounding of the ocean on the beach across the causeway; wind that whipped the palm fronds together with a dry, rasping sound; a creaking shutter gripped momentarily by the wind.

So absorbed was he that he did not hear a rustle among the giant red and white hibiscus that grew close against the study wall. He did not turn his head towards the window and so he did not see a furtive face, a cap drawn low over its eyes, a handkerchief over the lower part of the face.

Silence so intense that for a moment the wind hung suspended in the palm trees and even the ceaseless beat of the ocean seemed to hush a little. And then the light from the study window winked back, as though afraid, from the blue-black barrel of an automatic, equipped with a silencer, which the man outside the window raised, aimed very steadily and carefully straight upon the Vicar's broad, kindly back—and fired. There was a sort of "plop!" The tinkle of breaking glass. Nothing more.

The man at the window paused a moment, listening. The Vicar had slumped forward across his desk and lay very still. Then the man at the window turned and sped towards the road. There he paused for an instant, almost petrified, because a car had whipped around the curve in the road and its brilliant yellow headlights picked him out against the darkness

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like a bug on a piece of paper. Flinging up his hands to shield his face, he turned and plunged back into the shadows. The car sped on around the next bend in the road and silence once more took possession.

Although the white moonlight lay like silver where there were no trees, and though the shadows beneath the trees were inky black and there seemed a thousand places to hide, the cowering creature beneath the window where that small bullet-hole showed sought frantically for some means of escape. The person driving that car had seen him; there was only one way off the island and that was by means of the bridge; yet how could he pass the bridge-tender and the toll-house without being seen? At this time of the night there would be almost no one crossing the bridge. His appearance would be suspicious. They'd question him. Cold sweat broke out over him. His teeth were chattering furiously as his mind darted this way and that, trying to ferret some way out of this trap in which he had found himself. He couldn't stay here around this house; the death of the Vicar would be discovered any minute.

THEN HE remembered the map they had furnished him when they had offered him two hundred and fifty dollars to "silence" the man who was blocking the coming of gangdom to the island. There had been a house perhaps half a mile from the Vicarage. A large, empty old house. They had pointed it out to him as a hiding place if he needed it. His hopes stirred again. He had only to reach the house, to lie low there until morning when, among other people crossing the bridge to the mainland on ordinary affairs, he would stand a fine chance of making his escape.

He slunk along beside the road beneath the friendly shadow of the tall live-oak trees until the old house at the edge of the marsh loomed before him. Dark, empty, deserted, it looked a haven of refuge to him. Except, of course, that it *did* seem terribly lonely and isolated. But he laughed at himself for that.

He went upon the wide verandah and tried the doors and windows, but they were stoutly barred and the shutters locked in place. He worked his way around to the back at last and was prying at what must have been the kitchen door, when suddenly, without a moment's warning, the door jerked open beneath his hand and before him he saw a truly terrifying vision. Against the smoldering red embers of a fire that was dying down in the kitchen fireplace, he saw a man, tall and very gaunt, wrapped in a dark hood. The murderer took one look and stumbled, tried to run, fell flat and lay quite still.

From the room beyond the kitchen a man's voice called, "What is it, Watkins?"

And the tall, gaunt specter in the black robe, said politely, "A prowler, sir. He seemed determined to come in and then when I opened the door, sir, he seemed even more anxious not to come in. And then, sir, he fainted."

"If you've got that terrible black cape on, Watkins, I don't blame the poor devil," said the voice from the other room. "Give him a drink and when he begins to come to, put him out on the porch again."

"Yes, sir," said Watkins, and bent over the unconscious man, propping him up, while he forced liquor between the chattering teeth.

The man regained consciousness unexpectedly. His scream as he looked up into that hideous mask was piteous and craven. "I'll tell—I'll tell," he bleated wildly. "I killed him—but they hired me to do it I didn't do it because I wanted to—"

Watkins, startled, gave the man a little shake and said sternly, "Whom did you kill?"

"The old man—the parson—the one that's been shootin' his mouth off about not wantin' no night club here. But I just done it because they paid me. I didn't want to kill him—he didn't do nothin' to me."

The slithering sound of a rubber-tired wheel chair came as the door was pushed open and the murderer looked up to see a man whose hair was as white as snow, cheeks terribly sunken, his whole body racked and

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emaciated by some disease, in the doorway.

"Are you trying to tell me that you've murdered Mr. Burgame, the Vicar?" he demanded sternly.

"The old guy—down by the causeway—but it wasn't my fault—honest to God—" bleated the man on the floor, writhing away from Watkin's knee as the stimulant trickled revivingly down his throat. He crept towards the man in the wheel-chair.

"What's your name?" demanded the man in the wheel-chair.

BY NOW the murderer had managed to regain some small measure of his self-control. Now that he saw Watkins without that fearful mask and the enveloping black robe, he realized that Watkins was a human being, not some weird creature from a borderland half-way between life and death, as he had believed in his first hysteria. And the recapturing of his self-control gave him a measure of courage.

"Never mind my name," he snarled. "And never mind none o' the rest of it, either. What right you folks got here to be scarin' folks half out of their wits?"

"You killed Dr. Burgame and you will hang for it," stated the man in the wheel-chair.

The creature was no longer on the floor. He was on his feet now and in his hand was a revolver which menaced the two men before him as he edged towards the doorway.

"Stay right where you are, both of you," he ordered like some cornered animal. "Or I swear I'll blow the daylights out o' both of you. I'm getting out of here—see? And it ain't goin' to be good sense for nobody to try to stop me."

The man in the wheel-chair smiled faintly. "Nobody's going to be fool enough to try to stop you, man," he said. "For when you came on this island, you imprisoned yourself just as closely as though you'd gone into a room, closed and locked the door and thrown the key away. There is only one exit from the island. Over the bridge. And you have to pass directly below an arc-light above the toll-keeper's cage and pay him your toll. And by now the island is probably rocking with the news of your crime. You have just one chance—and a mighty slim one. That's to turn yourself over to the police and plead guilty!"

For a moment the man's eyes were filmed with panic. And then he straightened and said, "You're pretty smart, but not smart enough. I'm taking it on the lam."

The man in the wheel-chair nodded and said gravely, "That's for you to decide, of course."

The man hesitated a moment, then he melted through the door and into the blackness of the night outside. After the sound of his going had died away, the man in the wheel-chair looked at Watkins and shook his head, sighing a little. "Poor Dr. Burgame!" he said gravely. "A fine man who died for his principles!"

"Yes, sir—a fine man," agreed Watkins sincerely.

The man in the wheel-chair sat quite still for a long moment and then he said, "Well, Watkins, I guess this finishes our little masquerade. We can't lurk here and run the risk of delaying the capture of Dr. Burgame's murderer. Get me the bridge-tender on the telephone. And then we'll call the Sheriff. And after that—you'd better pack and send for the car."

"Yes, sir," said Watkins, and though the words were simple it was plain that the decision that the older man had made was a momentous one.

Chapter Eight

THERE WAS A BRISK rap on Isabel's door at a little before eight and the maid said quietly, "Please, Miss, Miz' Grable would like everybody to come down to breakfast. Something awful important has happened."

"I won't get up in the middle of the night for anyone," Isabel said crossly.

"But it's terrible important, Miss Richardson. It's about Mr. Halsted," said the maid, and grinned a little as she heard Isabel's startled gasp. She knew that Isabel would be down as

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soon as—if not before—any of the others.

Eileen, in a fresh frock of yellow linen was ready to go down when the maid knocked and she heard the girl go on to the other rooms. Puzzled, Eileen went out to her room and down the stairs just as Mark came in from the terrace.

"A specially scrumptious morning, my sweet," said Mark and though his tone was light and the look in his eyes was a caress. "What's all this poppycock about Mr. Halsted? Or haven't you heard?"

"I haven't heard," answered Eileen. She looked at the rose-pink and pale gold magic of the day and breathed a deep sigh, then added, "But no matter what it is, it can't be very bad—not on a day like this, can it?"

"Of course not, darling. On such a day as this, nothing could be very bad," agreed Mark as he kissed her.

Marcia came down looking fresh and crisp and neat, as a business-girl always learns to look before eight o'clock in the morning. Kit was near; a little disgruntled at being ordered down so early, a little out of sorts with the world in general. But Isabel and Caroline came down in flowered taffeta housecoats, looking cross and annoyed.

Mrs. Grable waited until they had all settled at the table and they had all had his first cup of coffee. Thus, having smoothed the scene as much as she could, Mrs. Grable faced them and said quietly, her hands folded above the old-fashioned white apron, "I'm afraid I have very bad news, and also some news that will upset you more or less. But you must hear it and without delay. So I seem to be elected to tell you. To begin with, the Vicar of St. Vincent's was murdered last night."

There was a murmur of protest and then Mrs. Grable went on:

"The murdered took refuge temporarily in what is called the "haunted house" on the edge of the marsh. The house, of course, is not really haunted. It has merely been a sort of refuge for a tired old man facing the last few difficult weeks or months of his life—Mr. Kirk Halsted."

THERE WAS a stunned silence. Those about the table stared at Mrs. Grable as though quite sure that she, or they, had gone suddenly insane. It was Mark who recovered the power of speech first and it was to demand incredulously, "Are you trying to tell us, Mrs. Grable, that Mr. Halsted, isn't dead after all?"

Mrs. Grable's chin quivered for a moment but she forced herself to steady it and to say quietly, "Not—yet. Though we are told by the doctors that it is merely a question of time—.

Caroline managed to speak now, in a tone sharp with outrage. "Do you mean to tell me that we've been tricked into coming down here, living like—like bugs under glass, for him to study us as though we were insects? For him to spy on us and check us up? Why, it's outrageous! It's—it's unforgivable!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mrs. Richardson, and I'm sure Mr. Halsted will be, when he arrives very soon," said Mrs. Grable quietly.

"He is coming here?" Isabel inquired.

Mrs. Grable nodded. "Because, having seen the murderer, he can no longer stay in hiding, and because he wants to meet you all and try to explain to you his reasons for getting you here. I am sorry if any of you feel outraged, I am sure he, too, will regret it even more than I do. It is only that so much of his life is tied up in this old place that I think he would not rest happily in his grave if he could not be certain that it would pass into hands that would cherish and tend it as he has done. He had no wish to hurt anyone."

"I think he proved that pretty conclusively when he gave us all five hundred dollars each and a month in this place," said Mark firmly. "For my part, I'm anxious to meet him and tickled to death to know he's alive."

"Oh, of course—we'll all be glad to meet him, of course!" said Eileen like an eager child.

Mrs. Grable looked at Eileen and then at Mark. And at something in her face, Isabel set her teeth hard and kicked her mother's ankle savagely.

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Caroline flung her an indignant glance and Isabel motioned her to silence. Kit, watching the whole scene, looked sardonically amused but said nothing.

Mrs. Grable explained that Mr. Halsted would arrive about ten, as soon as he had given his statement to the police. Meanwhile, she would get his rooms ready. Isabel and Caroline escaped to their own room and Isabel said sharply:

"Mother, if you don't stop that blabbing tongue of yours, we might just as well pack up and go straight home without waiting for the disposition of the legacy. You've developed a perfect passion, lately, for making a fool of yourself. Are you so determined to see to it that I don't inherit?"

CAROLINE said haughtily, halfway between tears and anger, "How dare you speak to me like that?"

"Because, Mother, you're making such an awful sap of yourself," answered Isabel hotly. "You've fought with everybody here, including the servants, until you've got them all hating you; and you've nagged Mark and Eileen until there's nothing they wouldn't do against you. And, of course, it's as plain as a pike-staff now the legacy will be awarded on the servant's reports. And I hate to think what those reports must be by now. So, for Heaven's sake, try to keep that temper of yours under a little better control for a while. At least for the rest of our stay—it's only ten days more, you know."

Long before she had finished Caroline was in tears. But Isabel went grimly on until she had finished her say, before she put her arms about her mother and tried half impatiently to comfort her.

So much depended on the next few days. They were going to have a chance to meet Kirk Halsted face to face. Of course, Isabel and Caroline agreed when Caroline's tears were over and they were beginning to dress themselves for their first meeting with Kirk Halsted, that they were the only two logical contestants to inherit the property, Eileen and Mark were so manifestly unfit for such responsibility; Kit would make ducks and drakes of the fortune and ruin the place before five years had passed. No, they alone were fitted by training and social position and responsibility to take on the lovely old place and manage it as Kirk Halsted would want it. And as they reached this conclusion their spirits rose immoderately.

When there came a sound of a car on the drive, they rushed to the window to look down. But all they could see was two men carefully lifting a small black and chromium specially-built wheel-chair out of the car and setting it on the terrace.

Caroline, in her simple flowered linen frock, surveyed Isabel, in white linen, quite proudly. Isabel was lovely and Isabel so royally deserved a break, thought Caroline and smothered a tear.

Together they went down the stairs, quite conscious of the picture they made, fresh and cool and crisp in their pretty frocks. There were voices from the terrace and as Caroline and Isabel came out the man in the wheel-chair turned his head to look at them. His eyes were deep-set, very brilliant and dark in his thin, pale face. His shrunken body, in the wheel-chair beneath his steamer rug, gave no hint as to whether he had been tall or short, slender or powerful. But there was a magnificiently valiant spirit in his face.

"Miss Richardson," he greeted Isabel and turned to Caroline. "And her lovely mother, of course. It was most kind of you, Mrs. Richardson, to chaperone your daughter here. It was unforgivably stupid of me not to have included you in the invitations at the moment of sending them. I do hope you understand that it was—rather a troublous time. I hope you will forgive me?"

"Of course, Mr. Halsted," said Caroline. "The only thing we find difficult to forgive is your hiding yourself away on that awful marsh, instead of being our host here."

"That's very gracious of you," said Halsted with a friendly smile.

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"But I was quite ill at first. The doctors forbade any excitement or activity whatever. I could not let my poor health be a damper on the pleasure of my guests. I hope you have enjoyed your stay here?"

"It's been glorious. Oleander is such a lovely place," answered Caroline promptly.

HALSTED studied her, smiling. "It lacks a woman's hand, I'm sure," he confided. "But unfortunately, there was no woman who could assist me. I hope you will consent to add that ever so necessary feminine touch here and there where it is needed. I'm sure a house that had enjoyed your touch would increase in charm immensely."

"How sweet of you to suggest it," Caroline purred, enchanted. "There *are* a few things I think would help a lot—"

Isabel set a merciless toe hard on her mother's ankle and Caroline set her teeth to keep back the cry of pain while Isabel said, "Don't listen to her, Mr. Halsted. She's a hopeless furniture-changer. I never dare come into a room in the dark for fear she's moved the bed where the chairs used to be."

Kirk smiled appreciatively and said something pleasant to Eileen, who flushed and stammered like a schoolgirl and wound up by beaming shyly and wholeheartedly at Kirk.

Kirk's eyes swept about to Kit and Marcia. "I know you, of course, Mr. Grant, and just where you fit into the picture," he said frankly. "Only I'm trying to place Miss Wilcox—"

Marcia smiled at him. Somehow he reminded her a little of her father. "I don't fit in at all, Mr. Halsted," she told him lightly. "Just forget about me entirely. I'm just a gate-crasher. I invited myself."

"And you are most welcome, my dear. It's our fault the invitation was delayed so long," said Halsted promptly.

Caroline glanced swiftly from Marcia's gentle face to Halsted's thin, pallid one and her lips tightened a little. She said nothing, but the toe of her slipper began lightly to pat the floor and her hands twisted at her handkerchief. Suddenly she looked up and met Mark Hewes' amused eyes. For a moment she and Mark looked squarely at each other and then a dark tide of color rose over Caroline's face and she got to her feet and flounced into the house.

"You mustn't mind my mother, Mr. Halsted," Isabel said clearly and distinctly. "She's not very well and her nerves are giving her a bit of trouble."

"Too bad," said Halsted gently. "I hope the stay at Oleander Hall hasn't increased her illness?"

"Oh, no—quite the contrary," answered Isabel. "She just needs sleep and rest, that's all." She lifted her pretty chin, adding, "You see, Caroline and I lead rather a busy life at home, what with parties and luncheons and balls. It's what she needs badly, this month's rest. But she scarcely knows how to relax, I'm afraid."

Mark Hewes made a gesture that acknowledged her gallantry and Isabel stood up.

"And now if you will excuse me, I think I'll drive over to Guale for a swim," she said politely.

"OH, BY THE way, Miss Richardson, be very careful, won't you?" suggested Halsted swiftly. "The murderer of poor Dr. Burgame hasn't yet been captured. They are combing the islands for him and they'll find him, of course. There is nowhere for him to go from St. Vincent's except Guale—and both Guale and St. Vincent's are being fine-combed in the search for him. He's a pretty desperate character, and I wouldn't want you to run into him."

Isabel hesitated and said unexpectedly, "Do you know, I have an idea I saw him last night?"

"What?" demanded the others startled, while Halsted watched her intently.

"Of course, I might be mistaken," said Isabel quickly. "It was only that as I crossed the causeway bridge on my way home last night—it was rather late, for I had stayed to see the

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movies at the Casino and hadn't realized how late it really was. Anyway, just as I rounded the curve by Dr. Burgame's, a man rose out of the shadows as though to cross the road. The light of the station-wagon picked him out very clearly. He stood quite still for a moment almost as though paralyzed by the lights. And then he turned and went stumbling back down the shadows into the Vicarage garden."

"A rough-looking man, poorly dressed, unshaven, with a hat drawn well down over his forehead? About medium height and build?" demanded Halsted.

"Yes—that description fits him perfectly."

Halsted nodded. "Then you must be doubly careful, my dear, for that is the murderer. Don't, under any circumstances, leave the main highway and if anybody tries to stop you, be sure they are police or neighbors whom you know personally. Otherwise, step on the gas!"

"Look here, Isabel," protested Kit uneasily, "if it's as dangerous as all that, do you think you'd better go at all? Why not stick around with the rest of us for the day? It might be a bit boring, but it will certainly be a lot safer."

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" protested Isabel, who quite urgently felt the need for solitude as represented by the golden Guale sands. "I'll do exactly as Mr. Halsted says—drive like the dickens, refuse to stop for anybody not known to me personally, and stay on the main road. I've simply got to have a swim."

Without further words to any of them, and without waiting for any words they may have wanted to add to their protest, she went running lightly across the drive to the station-wagon which was always at the command of the house-party guests, no matter what other cars were available.

"A beautiful girl," commented Halsted as she went driving away.

"She's—lovely," said Eileen like an eager, admiring child. "And her clothes are beautiful."

Halsted smiled at Eileen and then at Mark and at the look that passed between Mark and Eileen Halsted's eyebrows rose ever so little and a look of very real pleasure came into his pain-haunted eyes. But when he spoke it was of other matters that drew them all into the conversation.

Chapter Nine

AS SHE drove down the long, winding road that turned and twisted through the age-old forest, Isabel's mind was preoccupied. She scarcely saw the bright gold sunlight spilling through the thick-leaved branches of the live-oaks, glinting on the Spanish moss; the fields of wild phlox in every imaginable color that made the very earth look like some gorgeous carpet woven by fairy hands. She had no ears for the song of the birds that darted ecstatically through the warm golden air; she wasn't even appreciably disturbed when a long, lithe black thing sped across the road and she knew that it was a snake.

She was wrapped in thoughts. Kirk Halsted's sudden return to Oleander Hall. What was it going to mean for them all? Had her mother, in her zeal to win the inheritance for her child completely wrecked Isabel's chances? Or would Kirk or the servants understand a mother's quite natural anxiety—

She was in the loneliest stretch of the five-mile drive when suddenly a man loomed up out of the shadows beside the road and threw himself directly in front of the station-wagon. Acting with a swift, blind instinct that had no time for thought, she wrenched the wheel and barely missed striking the man. She so nearly knocked him down that when she saw she hadn't she screamed at him out of her giddy relief and mounting anger, "You fool! Did you want to be killed? Haven't you any sense at all, flinging yourself about like that?"

The man grinned as he came toward her, his hand on a blunt, blue-nosed automatic that wore a

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silencer. "Cut out the squawking, sister," he ordered shortly. "I've decided to let you drive me to the mainland. And we don't want the cops down on us before we get started."

"I drive you to the mainland? Don't be ridiculous!"

"I ain't ridiculous," snapped the man, and suddenly she knew who he was even though she had caught only the barest glimpse of him last night. And with her recognition of him her heart sank. "I'm desperate, sister. I've already killed one guy and I'd just as soon kill a dame, if I have to. Either you're going to drive me across the causeway, or you ain't going to drive nobody nowhere any more."

He was in the station-wagon now, crouching down at her heels, a robe caught about him so that he looked merely like a heap of luggage carelessy covered. He saw to it that one hand was free and this was the hand that held his gun. From where he sat it would be the simplest matter in the world for him to put a bullet straight through her heart. And somehow she knew without his telling her that he wouldn't hesitate the hundreth part of a second to do it.

"Now drive across the causeway, sister, and head north," he ordered her. "And if you let out one peep about me being here—well, they'll get me, all right. But I'll get you first—and don't you forget it. They can't hang me but once and if it's for two murders instead of one—well, that'll be just too bad for you, sister. Let's get going."

She was completely helpless, she knew. She could not argue with this murderous maniac. She knew that he would shoot her as casually as he mentioned it; that he would have no compunctions whatever. That she had no choice but to obey him. He had taken her off guard in flinging himself in front of the station-wagon like that and she hadn't had time to remember Kirk's warning.

SHE LET in the clutch, meshed the gears. The murderer gave a little sigh of satisfaction and she jammed her foot hard on the accelerator. If only she could in some way get them stopped by the police; arrested for speeding. If she could just arouse somebody's curiosity so that they would pursue the car—but, as though the man read her mind, he said swiftly, "Remember, sister, no funny business. It's lonely in here and there's a silencer on my gun. I could bump you off, take this tin wagon and be across the causeway before they found your body. I'd rather not do it, but if you insist—"

He left the rest of the threat hanging in the air. From where he sat, huddled beneath the robe, he could look squarely into her face and the pistol did not waver in its silent deadly menace.

She set her teeth hard and drove. But suddenly through the woods that bordered the road, she heard the sound of dogs and of men. The long-drawn, mournful baying that once heard is never forgotten—the baying of bloodhounds. In the shadows of the robe she thought the murderer's face blanched a little but through his teeth he said grimly, "Keep moving, sister. If they stop you to ask questions, don't forget— they can get me, but not before I get you. And don't think I'm fooling."

There was the cold, deadly venom of a rattlesnake in his hissing words and Isabel set her teeth hard and drove on. At the crossroads, where one broad, paved road leads towards the village of St. Vincent's, the other, at right angles to it, leads to Guale, several men stopped her. As the car rolled to a stop, she felt a hand close hard about her bare ankle and she shivered with loathing and disgust. She knew it as a final, silent warning that her life hung in the balance for the next minutes.

One of the men came toward her, took off his hat and said, "It's one of the young ladies from Oleander Hall isn't it? Reckon you folks were pretty surprised today when you found that Mr. Halsted was still alive."

"We were, of course," answered Isabel, her hands clenched tightly on the wheel, feeling that cold, clammy hand about her ankle, knowing that

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the man she carried with such loathing and such reluctance wouldn't hesitate to destroy her if she so much as gave the slightest inkling of his presence.

"Well, the rest of us were pretty surprised, too. But then it's like Mr. Halsted to be kind of peculiar," said the man pleasantly. "We were all mighty glad to know he was still with us. Reckon you know what we are out here for? To find the son of a gun—begging your pardon, Miss!—that murdered Dr. Burgame. Reckon you haven't seen him along the road?"

And hating her helplessness, wild with the thought that here was rescue for herself, punishment for her captor in the reach of her little finger, Isabel dared say no more than a curt, "No, I haven't seen anyone I didn't know. I'm sorry."

THE COLD fingers that gripped her ankle bit so deeply that she all but whimpered with the pain as the men stood aside, laughing in polite appreciation of her vigorous denunciation, and watched her drive away.

"Step on it, sister," urged the man at her feet, his voice thick with fear and anger. "These fellows down here ain't got no respect for law and order at all."

"But of course *you* have!" sneered Isabel.

"Cut that stuff, sister. I don't allow no dame to talk to me like that," snarled the murderer, and Isabel, loathing him with her whole soul so deeply that she almost forgot to be afraid of him, laughed.

"How are you going to keep me from telling you that you are the slimiest, the foulest thing that ever breathed?" she demanded contemptuously. "If you kill me now, you haven't a chance in the world to escape. You don't dare lay a finger on me until you're across the causeway—unless you want to be captured yourself."

"Say you got guts, ain't you, sister?" said the man admiringly. "No, I don't want to kill you unless you squeal to somebody along here and they try to arrest me. I'd a lot rather ride with you across the bridge and part friends."

"Friends!" The word left Isabel's lips in a savage denial. "You scum!"

Her mind was tortured with the wild desire to find some way in which to turn the man over to the authorities before they left the island. She thought of crashing the car. But to drive through the railing of the bridge—no, the station-wagon wouldn't burst through that solid barrier unless it was being driven at a terrific speed, in which case the station wagon would sink and she and the man be drowned. Yet as she drank in the sweet, faintly salty breath of of spring air, as her harrowed eyes looked at the blue sky, at the bright beds of double petunias flaunting their lovely, ruffled selves about the toll-house, the savor of life was sweet in her nostrils. And she knew that though she should feel heroic and daring, and risk her life to bring this man to justice, she was, after all, only a girl. And she wanted to live.

She set her teeth hard, drove onto the bridge, fished in her pocket for necessary toll-fare, prayed with all her heart that the bridge-tender would sense the man beneath that enveloping robe. And her heart sank as the toll-taker gave her her change, saluted and stood back. She sent the station-wagon over the causeway and into the highway on the mainland.

"Keep straight north, sister—I'll tell you what to do," ordered the man at her feet. With despair and a feeling of shame that she had muffed her one big chance to be a heroine, Isabel winked the tears from her eyes, pressed her foot hard on the accelerator and sent the station-wagon flying, into the open country. They crossed another inlet and now the road stretched ahead of them, lonely sun, sun-swept, breezy, with only an occasional car whipping past them in one direction or the other. Cattle and hogs grazed peacefully beside the side the road.

The murderer sat up now, scan-

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ning the road ahead. "Turn off the highway down this little trail," he ordered sharply.

A new terror shook her, but she set her teeth and obeyed. Around a little curve in the narrow lane, and they might have been miles away from the highway. Yellow jessamine flung itself halfway up the tree-trunks and crab-apple foamed in a little clearing.

But she had neither thought nor time for the beauty of the soft spring morning. The murderer had flung the blanket off and was saying curtly, "Get out,"

Isabel hesitated, but there was nothing to be gained by defying him now. The time for that had gone. With her heart climbing into her throat, she got out of the station-wagon, facing the brute, trying hard not to reveal her shrinking terror of him.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded with an attempt at courage that she knew failed miserably.

"Shut up!" ordered the man and moving so quickly that she had no time to realize his intentions, he struck her full on the head with the butt of the gun. There was a moment of blinding pain and then blackness swept over her....

IT WAS *noon* before the people at Oleander Hall became alarmed at Isabel's failure to return. Kit drove over to Guale, but no one there had seen her. The posse had completed its search of the two islands without finding a trace of the murderer. But the bridge-tender, when the search for Isabel assumed fullfledged proportions remembered her crossing the bridge.

"But why would she cross the bridge?" demanded Caroline, white with terror, yet trying so bravely to keep up her courage that the others were touched to pity. "She was only going to Guale for a swim.

Mark questioned the bridge-tender who, of course, knew Isabel and the rest of the house-party by sight. No, said the bridge-tender, she didn't seem to be nervous or anything. She acted more like she was hopping mad. Too mad to exchange a morning greeting with him, or even pass the time of day. She was alone and wore just a beach robe over her bathing suit.

"She wouldn't have gone to the mainland in a bathing suit, unless there was something terribly wrong," protested Caroline, and the others agreed.

The posse who had stopped the station-wagon and talked to Isabel corroborated the bridge-tender's story that she had been alone and that she had been in a bad humor. At least, she had not been in any mood for speech.

By now the fact that there had been threatening letters in Dr. Burgame's mail for several days prior to his murder had drawn the government's FBI men into the murder investigation and both Guale and St. Vincent's were seething with excitement.

A search that had fine-combed the two islands and proved that neither the murderer nor Isabel could possibly be there, had caused the hunt to shift to the mainland.

"Though how that murderer got off the island, unless he just waded out into the ocean until his hat sank, is something I'll never understand," more than one man in that tired searching party pointed out. "He couldn't possibly swim to the mainland. And he couldn't have taken a boat either without being seen,"

It was after sundown before an FBI man picked up a clue. A station-wagon answering to the description of the one in which Miss Richardson had last been seen had been discovered wrecked on a side-road just above Darien. This accounted for the station-wagon not having been seen earlier. There was no trace of either the girl or the murderer.

THE FALLING of the heavy dew that was like a light, chill rain roused Isabel to consciousness. She lay face down in some bramble-bushes, her wrists tied behind her by strips of the lap-robe, her ankles trussed tightly by more strips of the same. A gag that had almost suffocated her had been twisted savagely

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in her mouth and tied so securely that the more she struggled the tighter it wound itself.

She was conscious first of general discomfort. And then of a dull throbbing in her head and of the pain in her arms and ankles. The strips had been tied so tightly that the heavy wool cut savagely into her soft flesh. It was pitch dark where she lay and she fought desperately to try to turn over, finally managing to lift her head so that she could see that she lay at the foot of a sort of ravine, with thick growing underbrush and brambles above her, completely hiding her from anyone that might come this way.

She was tortured with thirst, weak with hunger and pain. Her beach robe had become disarranged so that it offered scant protection from the chill wind that rose and quickened, coming straight from the ocean and the inlets with the falling of darkness.

Now and then she could hear cars whipping by on the highway. If only she could manage to crawl out there where she could be seen! If only she could make some sound. Frantically, she struggled but had to stop at last because her ankles and her wrists were chafed and bleeding and the knots had only tightened.

She lost consciousness toward midnight. Awoke dimly to hear the murmur of voices, footsteps, people talking. Frantically, she tried to make a sound, to attract their attention, but was helpless.

It was a half-grown farm boy who found her in the faint dawnlight as he came whistling along the narrow path on his way to milk. In reality it was his dog, a friendly collie, who found her. For the dog, sniffing through the brush, stopped suddenly and gave a short, excited bark before he went plunging down the shallow ravine and there gave vent to a series of sharp barks that brought his frightened master to his side.

The girl, trussed up like an animal, her scanty clothes stained and soiled, her face white, her eyes wide and pleading above that cruel gag. At first he thought she was dead. And then her eyes moved and he thought swiftly of his dog's eyes that time last summer when he had been accidentally shot by a careless hunter.

The boy knelt swiftly and, with his stout pocket-knife, slashed the strips that bound the girl's wrists and ankles. With a clumsy gentleness he took the gag from her mouth.

The agony of returning circulation after the bitter hours of being tied up made Isabel cry out in pain and the farm boy, distressed, tried to support her against his knee, saying swiftly, "I better get you to the house, lady. Maw'll know what to do for you."

He stood up, lifted her in his arms, and staggering a little beneath her slight weight, he went hurrying down the lane with her until he reached the porch of a battered, yet not unattractive old house.

He came, calling lustily at the top of his voice, "Ma! Oh, Ma—looky here!"

"Name o'goodness, Jim, what ails you?" demanded a woman's voice from the kitchen as his mother stepped out on the back porch. And then, as she saw his burden, she gave a startled cry and came hurrying towards him. "What happened, son? Another o' them automobile accidents?'"

"Nope," answered the boy eagerly. "I found her in the bushes, all tied up like a shoat ready for market."

"Bring the poor thing into the house, Jim!" ordered the woman, hurrying ahead.

Half a dozen little tow-heads in varying sizes and varying states of dress and undress seemed to pop up out of the floor. A grizzled, middle-aged man, came hurrying from the barn carrying an armful of stove-wood.

"It's the girl from St. Vincent's he said the moment he looked down at Isabel. "The one that's been missing since yesterday morning. They thought that the feller that murdered poor old Doc Burgame had kidnaped

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her. I reckon he did, at that."

He turned purposefully to the wide-eyes, excited Jim. "Put a saddle on Old Bess and beat it to the nearest telephone and let folks know we've found her," he ordered. "Reckon the Blue Anchor Inn'll be the best place. Call the police on the mainland. They'll notify the right folks on the islands. And don't you let no grass grow under your feet, son."

"Nope, Im pretty near there now," answered Jim and thrust his way importantly through the brood of bewildered children. A few minutes later they heard the pounding of Old Bess' hoofs as Jim carried out his orders.

THE FARM woman, with work-calloused hands that were amazingly gentle, bathed the bruised ankles and wrists the tortured mouth, and forced a stimulant between Isabel's blue lips. As the girl began to rouse a little, the stimulant was followed by warm milk until at last she slept soundly and healthfully, a faint trace of color returning to her cheeks.

Almost before Mrs. Hawkins could feed her small brood and get them out from under her heels the first car came into the lane. A car carrying the police and two of the FBI men alighted than another car, carrying a couple of newspaper reporters and a camera-man, bumped down the lane. The car from Oleander Hall was third, and out of it stumbled a haggard white-faced Caroline whose tragic eyes were sunk deep in her pallid face and who clung with a pathetic dependence to the arm of Mark on her right, and of Kit on her left.

"Where's—my baby?" she whispered piteously as she stumbled up the steps of the shabby old house.

"I reckon you can go right in, seein' you're her mother," said Mrs. Hawkins gently. "The police brought Dr. McCurdy with 'em, and he's examining her now. She's sleeping like a baby, poor little thing. She was nearly starved and half dead with thirst—"

Caroline caught her breath on a choking moan and Mrs. Hawkins said swiftly, "There, now, if I ain't the dumbest—you go right in, ma'am, and see for yourself."

Mark and Kit supported Caroline to the door of the spare room and there she braced herself, drew a long breath and walked forward alone. The doctor, seated beside the bed, stood up, laying the sleeping girl's wrist gently down as he did so.

"How—how—" Caroline could not form the words.

"Suffering from exposure and shock—and badly bruised wrists and ankles—but otherwise unharmed," said the doctor, and one knew from his tone how glad he was to be able to say that truthfully. "She'll be quite all right in a few days."

"Oh—thank God, thank you, God!" whispered Caroline and went down on her knees beside the bed.

Isabel awoke slightly, stirred a little, said faintly, out of throat muscles swollen so that speech was difficult, "Hello—Mother. Sorry—you were—frightened."

And Caroline wept unrestrainedly, her face hidden against the pillow on which Isabel's head lay.

Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins, Jim and the half-dozen little tow-heads had never in their most dream-like days pictured anything like this. There were newspaper men stumbling all over the photographs until even the collie seemed to understand what was expected of him and, at the sight of a camera, sat up and laughed with his pink tongue lolling happily.

BUT IT was not until the second day that Isabel was able to tell them her story. Her voice still husky, so that she had to rest frequently, she was propped up in bed ready to be removed to Oleander Hall, while the police, a court stenographer and the FBI men listened intently.

Afterwards, the big limousine from Oleander Hall came to take her away and Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins and their

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children said good-by regretfully.

They were so glad to welcome her back to Oleander Hall that everybody forgot there had ever been a time when they hadn't liked her. Isabel, at the top of her stride arrogantly sure of herself, selfish, lovely, determined to have everything her own way, was one person; this girl with the eyes out of which the ghost of terror had not quite vanished, who was gentle and sweet, so grateful for every little touch of kindness, was another person entirely and no one could do quite enough for her.

Chapter Ten

IT WAS on Isabel's second night at home, when she had insisted on coming down to dinner, that there was the sound of a car in the drive. No one paid any particular attention, because for the last few days cars were plentiful in the drive and along the highway.

There was the murmur of voices in the hall and then a man, tall, and good-looking, came into the dining room, his eyes searching for Isabel. Finding her, he came straight to her, forgetful for the moment of everybody else in the room.

"My dear, when I read in a newspaper what had happened to you..." said Pat DeBardeleben, careless of who heard him. "I promptly chartered a plane and flew here. Thank the good Lord you are safe, darling."

Isabel's breath caught in her throat. He had called her "dear" and "darling." And he hadn't seemed in the least to mind that the others had heard him. He was still holding her hands, looking into her eyes as though he could never get enough of just looking at her.

For a long moment Isabel looked up at him, caught in breathless wonder by his unexpected arrival and by his even more unexpected endearments. And then a litle gust of anger shook her. He had gone away with only the briefest word to her; he hadn't written or taken the slightest notice of her; and now here he was back again all ready to take up where he had left off without so much as a "by your leave."

She smiled at him derisively as she drawled, "My *dear* Mr. DeBardeleben! How you *do* run on! Don't you know you mustn't go around saying nice things indiscriminately to every woman you meet? Somebody will take you seriously, and then look what a jam you'll be in."

Pat's face darkened and it was obvious that he was about to say something violent. But Isabel cut him short by presenting him to Kirk Halsted, who had been a silent but very deeply interested onlooker, and to Marcia, whom he had not met before.

It developed that Pat had had dinner. But he would have a cup of coffee with them in the drawing-room, he was as restless as a fish out of water. Suddenly he said, "Isn't there a moon or something? Couldn't we at least look at the garden?"

Halsted's eyes twinkled and he said courteously, "By all means, Miss Isabel, do show him the night-blooming cereus. It's rather wonderful just now."

With her cheeks distinctly pink, Isabel stood up and said brightly to Kit and Marcia, to Mark and Eileen, who were looking at her with teasing eyes, "Why can't we all go and look at the night-blooming cereus?"

Mark barely restrained a wink at Pat whose eyes were pleading with him. And Mark said, "Thanks, but night-blooming cereuses—or is it cereusi?—always start my asthma."

Kit chuckled. "It's hay-fever with me. Besides, I saw a night-blooming cereus once. It wasn't so much."

Pat had taken Isabel's hand and was drawing her out of the room with him, while Caroline looked on, rebellious, uneasy—until Halsted said quietly, "Isn't it what you want for her? He seems a very nice young man?"

Caroline smiled. "I want whatever guarantees her happiness—only I want to be sure it does just that."

Kirk nodded. "It's what we all want for our young people, isn't it? Only we can't ever guarantee it. We have to let them fall down and hurt themselves in order to learn."

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Outside on the terrace, beneath that same white moon that had shone on her as she lay face down in the briars at the foot of the ravine a few nights ago, Isabel stood facing Pat. Her voice was a little hurried as she told him:

"The night-blooming cereuses are down here."

"The heck with the cereuses. It's you I want to see and you I want to talk to," said Pat. "Look here, Isabel, when I found that you had disappeared and that there was some connection between your disappearance and that murderer—well, I knew in a blinding flash that I loved you and that the only chance of happiness that ever existed for me was wrapped up in you."

"You managed to keep your secret beautifully. You went away almost without a word. You didn't write—"

"I know, darling, and I hate myself for that," said Pat. "The only thing I can offer as an excuse is that I was pretty tired—"

"Of me?"

"No, darling—of someone else. To put it baldly and brutally, I was pretty tired of being pursued just because my grandfather and my father happened to have a good head for business and were kind enough to lay up a few shekels in my name," Pat acknowledged frankly. "Ever since I can remember, every girl that has looked at me has seen a dollar-mark, or bags of gold, instead of me. They've been so eager to get their pretty little fingers sunk in the DeBardeleben bank-roll that they've almost forgotten that I go with the bank-roll! I've been the object of all sorts of schemes ranging from blackmail to breach of promise, and all along the line. Until —well, I've become rather girl-shy."

"I see," said Isabel.

THEY WERE seated now on a white wrought-iron bench. Pat bent and peered anxiously into her face. "No," he said, shaking his head, "you don't see at all, darling. Because —well, because you were not one of the girls. I'd have stood quite still and waited for your little lasso if you'd been out to get me. But you were not. There was a girl who was sort of—well, bent on putting the Indian sign on me, so I sort of—well, took it on the lam until she should get discouraged. And then I heard about what had happened to you and I couldn't get back fast enough. Darling, you *do* understand?"

"Quite," said Isabel, and looked down at her slim white hands that were twisted cruelly together in her lap. "Only now that you've told me the truth about you, you're going to have to hear some truths regarding me."

"Gladly, darling," agreed Pat and he captured her hand, holding it in spite of her lack of response.

"Then you should know first of all that of all the girls who have pursued you, not one has been more shameless or more desperate—than I! No, no—let me finish," she pleaded when Pat tried to stop her. "The day I saw you on the beach—you were not just a man, tall and disturbingly good-looking. To me you were a walking dollar-sign, someone who could guarantee my future. I need never be afraid to answer the door-bell for fear of finding the landlord on the doorstep with a rent-bill marked 'In arrears.' If I could get you to marry me, I need never worry about bills again. And I could snub all the financially secure dowagers and their debutante daughters who have been busily snubbing me for so long. That was why I made such a terrific play for you."

There was a short silence. The wind blowing from the ocean a mile or so straight across the marsh seemed to wander through the trees, whimpering sadly. Isabel's hands were clenched and she stood with her back to Pat so that he could not see her face.

"And then?" Pat prompted.

She shrugged and drew a long breath. "And then—you went away. I knew it was because I had baited my trap badly and that you had guessed—" She caught her breath and whirled around to face him, her head flung back, her face white, great tears sliding down her cheeks.

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"Poor darling." Pat drew her into his arms and held her very close. For a moment she clung to him, her face hidden against his shoulder.

When she had managed to pull herself together she straightened, helped herself to the linen handkerchief in his breast pocket, mopped her eyes with it and said harshly, "And now that you know the worst about me—shall we go back and join the others?"

"Presently," said Pat. "There's lots of time. You haven't told me yet when you're going to marry me, you know, and we might as well set the date."

ISABEL stood perfectly still, holding his handkerchief against her tremulous mouth. His arms were about her, so that she leaned back a little against their support.

"M-m-marry you?" she stammered faintly. "You—you mean—you want to marry me—after all I've told you?"

"More now than ever," said Pat quietly. "Because when you told me all that you told me, too, that you loved me."

"I do, I do—but I didn't expect you to believe me," she whispered piteously.

Pat bent and kissed her. "Didn't you, darling? Well, I did. I knew, of course, that if you were merely marrying money you'd have leaped at my proposal. You'd never have taken a chance on my getting away by telling me all that. I'm probably saying it very badly, but that's the way I feel about it. I love you very dearly, darling, and I want very much to marry you. And I believe you love me—so what are we waiting for?"

There was no strength in her arms now to push him away. But there was strength to cling to him, saying as she lifted a radiant face, "Oh, darling—I do love you, I do. I'm s-s-sorry you haven't lost all your money so I can prove that it is you that I love!"

Pat laughed. "Don't wish we'd lose the money, darling," he teased. "Think of the fun we are going to have spending it."

When at last they went into the house, hand in hand, there was a small but unmistakable smudge of lipstick on Pat's collar and Isabel's eyes were starry, her lovely hair disheveled.

"Did you see the cereus?" asked Kirk Halsted gently.

They stared at him blankly and then Pat said, "Oh, yes, the cereus—did we see the cereus, darling?"

"If it's a cluster of stars somewhere near the Southern Cross—" began Isabel and dissolved in soft laughter.

"We're going to be married," said Pat, and though he spoke quietly the vibrant joy in his voice made it sound like a shout of triumph. "Within a month."

Caroline gave a little broken wail. "Oh, but, darling—you can't possibly. What about a trousseau?"

"We're going to pick that up in Paris," answered Pat proudly, smiling down at Isabel.

"It seems to me, said Halsted, "it would be a most beautiful and fitting end to the house-party if you would consent to be married here, in the garden. It's a marvelous setting for a wedding. Maybe we could coax Eileen and Mark to make it a double wedding?"

Eileen blushed and Mark closed his hand over hers and said promptly, "Thanks—there's nothing we'd like better, is there, darling?"

"Nothing!" answered Eileen happily and smiled at him.

"Then it's a deal," said Pat, grinning, and shook hands with Mark.

No one save Kit noticed when Marcia slipped from the room, her eyes filled with tears. Kit started to rise, to follow her; then dropped back into his chair, his hands clenched hard together, his jaw set and taut. Caroline saw Halsted glance swiftly at Kit, as though a little puzzled, frowning. The next moment the old man had turned back to the four young people who were chattering like mad over their plans.

Chapter Eleven

A DAY OR TWO later news reached Oleander that Dr. Burgame, now sleeping peacefully in the little churchyard beneath the giant oak, had been avenged. His mur-

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derer had been trapped near Savannah and had tried to "shoot it out" with the combined forces of local police and FBI men. He had not been successful. The murderer himself had died, riddled with bullets.

And so Oleander Hall settled down to the last few days of the house-party. A trained nurse had been quietly and unobtrusively installed in a room adjoining Kirk Halsted whose thoughts were centered on that double wedding that was scheduled for the first of May. The last day of the house-party.

Old Bowan was seeing to it that the garden was at its most perfect. Tiny paper cones were fastened over some of the roses that threatened to bloom to early. The oleanders shook out their lovely, delicately scented pompoms of pink and rose and white all along the drive. The leaves were the new-polished green that looks as though it has been oiled. The graveled drives had been raked until not a pebble was out of place, or a fallen leaf left to mar the perfection of the thick green turf.

Early on the morning before that set for the wedding, Marcia was walking alone along the Ghost Walk when suddenly she heard a footfall behind her and turned to smile brightly at Kit. Kit saw that her eyes were faintly pink from tears and that there was a little droop to her red mouth that tugged at his heart.

"What in the world are you doing out so early?" she wanted to know. "Heavens, this is the middle of the night for you, isn't it?"

There was a little grilled-iron bench beneath one of the tall yew trees and Kit drew her down on it, his face grave, his eyes steady. "You despise me pretty thoroughly, don't you, darling?" he said gravely. Before she could answer he went on, "Not that I blame you. I deserve to have you despise me. I'm a pretty worthless sort, I know. But I do love you, Marcia.

Marcia drew her feet swiftly beneath the bench to protect her shabby shoes from his sight and said quietly, "I don't despise you, Kit. Sometimes I wish I could. It would be so much easier for both of us."

"Easier?" Kit repeated dully.

There were tears in he eyes now and she said, "We ought never to have loved each other, darling. It just wasn't meant to be, somehow. We are so utterly different. Ten thousand miles apart in every possible way. I am practical, and a good, thrifty manager. The things that money can buy don't mean an awful lot to me. A cottage, with space for a garden and a pup and—a sand-pile or so—seems Paradise to me. With a husband coming home from the office every night to share it with me—and the children. But that sort of life seems unbearably dull and stodgy to you."

"Not the way you describe it, it doesn't!" said Kit quietly. "Somehow, in the month I've been here things seem different. Marcia, I'd like to live in the country—really in the country. I'd like to have about three hundred acres, and make it self-supporting, and have dogs and a horse or two—"

Marcia smiled at him, misty-eyed. "And be a country gentlemen, darling? The landed squire? It would be nice, darling—if one had a large and substantial income."

Kit's color deepened. "You think me a fool don't you, Marcia?"

Marcia's eyes were misted with tears but her smile was valiant as she said quietly, "No, darling. I love you, so how could I think you a fool? It's only that you've never learned how to be poor, dearest. And I've never had the chance to learn anything else. So—it wouldn't work, darling."

"Not even if we loved each other a very great deal?"

Marcia shook her head. "Not even then, dearest. It's just not in the cards, and we may as well face it."

Kit turned to her, caught both her hands in his, held them closely against his breast, his eyes pleading with her so that her heart shook and then went on beating heavily and painfully.

"THERE'S never been anybody but you, Marcia," he said quickly.

Marcia nodded. "I know, dear," she said, as though he had been a spoiled

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little boy. "There's never been anyone else, yet I sat in my room here one day above the terrace—and heard you and Mrs. Richardson planning how you and Isabel could double your chances of inheriting Oleander Hall—by marrying each other."

Kit caught his breath and his harassed, unhappy eyes turned away from hers, as though he found their clear gaze more than he could endure. He rose, thrust his hands into his pockets and walked away from her, standing for a moment with his back to her his shoulders drooping.

Marcia waited, she had all of life in which to wait. This little scene would put the finish once and for all to her dreams of ever meaning anything real to Kit. She had loved him so long! Waited so long for him to grow up to man's estate. To have done with his boyish dreams of vast wealth and turn to her, a man ready to carve his destiny with his hands for the sake of the woman by his side. But now she knew that Kit was never to be that man. That he was soft and weak. That the woman who walked hand in hand with Kit would have to be strong for both of them.

Oh, he would be very dear and very sweet and no woman could help loving him. But a woman would have to be willing to bear the brunt of living, and not ask to be sheltered, if she were to be married to Kit. There would be times when he would hurt her terribly; but it would never be consciously or deliberately. Kit was weak and soft but Kit was not cruel of mean. And he would be faithful to one woman. Once he had set the seal of his love on a woman. he would never desert her.

And it came to Marcia as she waited there in the dew-wet cool of the spring morning, that Kit was pretty much of a man after all. Not the kind of man, like Pat DeBardeleben, who would tuck his beloved under his arm and ride away with her, to shield and comfort and protect her in cotton-wool the rest of her life; not the gay, happy-go-lucky comrade that Mark Hewes would be, sharing the good with his woman, seeing to it for her sake that there wasn't a lot of the bad to be shared. But Kit would be kind and gentle and conscientious—so what did it matter if he were not strong? Hadn't she long ago learned strength enough for two? Hadn't her years of shielding her father, protecting him from the hard knocks of life, seeing that only the best befell him—hadn't those years been training her for this moment when the man of her heart should turn to her, as Kit did suddenly?

He came and stood beside her, looking down at her and his face was gray and set, his eyes bitter. "I'm not going to lie to you, Marcia," he told her almost grimly. "It would make a much prettier story if I could. But somehow, I don't seem to be able to lie to you. Yes, I thought of marrying Isabel to increase our chances of inheriting. I knew that Isabel would agree to a divorce as quickly as it would be safe, and then I could come to you with hands that were not empty. Because, whether it's worth having or not, darling, you've always had all of me that any woman ever could have. Perhaps it's not love. I'm afraid it's nothing very noble—but it's the only love I have ever felt and, if you want it, it's yours."

"THANK YOU, dearest," said Marcia and there were tears in her eyes as she patted the seat beside her. "Come and sit down, darling. We might as well talk this out once and for all, for I shall be leaving right after the ceremony tomorrow."

"Marcia! You can't go. I mean—I can't give you up—" he began. He sat down beside her and took her hand, enclosing it between both his own, waiting for whatever she might have to say.

"Darling, do you remember a week-end that you and I spent with my sister and her husband last spring?" asked Marcia quietly. "Think hard, dear, and try to remember it all. Dick's salary is three thousand a year. They haven't a penny from any other source. Remember the funny little house and Myra's garden and the pup? And the baby, of course."

Kit sat very still. Like a movie film unreeled before his eyes, he saw

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it. That cheap, shoddy little bungalow on a raw, ugly new street in a cheap subdivision. Stunted saplings that were some day to be shade-trees bordered the grassless streets. The day was spring but unseasonably hot. He and Marcia had driven out with Marcia's brother-in-law, Dick, and it had been at three o'clock, the hottest hour of the day, when they arrived.

The cottage had seemed to simmer in the heat, like a Sunday roast in the oven. Not a breath of air stirred. Inside the house there was the faint smell of a baby's drying laundry and of the night's dinner as it cooked; the tired, futile whirring of an electric fan that barely stirred the air but did not cool it. The cheap new furniture was sticky with paint and glue; the baby was cross, totured by heat-rash and by last night's mosquitoes and the fact that he was teething, and he wailed incessantly. Dinner was a meal that Kit couldn't forget. Poor Myra had tried to be "stylish" and instead of cold cuts and a crisp salad and iced-tea, she had served roast leg of lamb with dressing and candied sweet potatoes, hot coffee, two hot vegetables. The table had steamed so that the butter melted into yellow grease.

And all night Kit had tossed on a lumpy rickety cot, bathed in perspiration and promising himself that never again so long as he lived would he let himself in for anything like this.

Marcia watched him and her heart ached. One look at his face told her that he *was* remembering all too well. Suddenly she got to her feet, and said briskly, steadying her voice with an effort, "And that, my angel, is what it is like to 'get by' on three thousand a year! You see, you wouldn't like it at all. You'd think of you rich friends and their beautiful homes, and their villas in Florida in the winter and their yachts in the Caribbean—and people l i k e that wouldn't invite you if you were married, darling—"

Kit said very quietly, "Marcia, I love you very much. Will you please marry me?"

Marcia's eyes were like dark stars and there was a lovely color in her cheeks. But she had herself in hand almost at once and shook her head gently. "No, lover—I couldn't. Because I love you so much that to see you trying not to stop loving me, watching our dream, break between our hands—dearest, I couldn't take it! Forgive me. I'd rather end it here and now, while it's still bright and glorious with beauty. Let's not spoil it."

And before he could say anything she had bent swiftly, kissed him, and was gone.

Kit sat on for a long time, staring straight before him, facing in his heart the inescapable fact that he loved Marcia and that she loved him, but that she knew him so well that she was unwilling to take a chance with him. A chance that would mean all their lives together.

Meanwhile, Marcia was trying desperately to reach the haven of her own room before the tears came. But she was not destined to achieve that for at the top of the stairs, the linen-clad nurse met her, saying pleasantly, "Good morning, Miss Wilcox. If you're not busy, Mr. Halsted would like to see you for a moment."

"Of course I'm not busy and I feel flattered that Mr. Halsted should remember I'm around," said Marcia prompty. She followed the nurse to Kirk's room, hoping she could sit somewhere where her tearful eyes would not be visible. The least she could do for Mr. Halstead was to show him a cheerful face, she told herself.

HALSTED greeted her pleasantly. He was propped up in bed and his ruby-colored dressing-gown lent him an entirely fictitious touch of color. He looked very weak and Marcia noticed, with a little stab of pity at her heart, that his hands were so thin as to seem almost transparent. But she greeted him with surface gaiety and sat down in the chair the nurse brought to the side of the bed.

"You're very gracious to spare me a visit this beautiful morning," he said.

"Please don't say that! As though

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you didn't know that I am flattered to death you'd let me come in! And we both know the others will be green with envy! It's a real privilege, and an honor."

Halsted's flashing smile lit up his thin face and dark eyes. He made a little gesture in lieu of a bow and then he said quietly, gravely, "My dear, I am a very old man—" He broke off, twinkling a little. With the air of a conspirator, he added in an entirely different tone of voice, "Of course I needn't point out to you that any time a tiresome old fossil is going to be impertinently prying, or unbearably rude, he starts by reminding you that he is an old man?"

Marcia's laugh was gay and fresh and Halsted listened as though the sound was very pleasant. And then he went on quietly, "I've been watching you and that young man of yours. And I've been wondering—why we don't have a triple wedding here tomorrow instead of a mere double?"

Marcia's laughter had fled and her eyes were grave but they met his steadily.

"Because, Mr. Halsted, Kit's never learned to be poor and I've never learned to be rich," she answered simply.

"And you're afraid to take a chance on being poor?"

"I'm not—for myself. Being poor is nothing to be afraid of. It can be fun, even, for two people who know how to go about it. But for Kit, who was brought up with no trade but to be a rich man's son and to spend money gracefully—I am afraid. I couldn't quite bear it if, suddenly, he began to miss the rich friends and the fine homes to which he was always being invited—"

"Yet you would not want Kit to be made overnight a rich man?" Halsted pointed out. "It would be like tying full-ripe, perfect fruit on a young, untried tree that has not yet learned its lesson of bearing."

Marcia nodded, smiling faintly. "I know," she answered unsteadily. "But with things as they are now, he has the benefits of luxuries he would lose if he were married. An attractive young bachelor without any money never lacks invitations, but once he marries—"

Halsted was studying her closely. "Do you honestly believe that his invitations, his wealthy friends, mean more to Kit than you do?"

Marcia set her teeth for a moment before she answered him quite honestly. "I—don't know," she said with an almost childlike frankness.

"WELL, MY dear, I know! Because I've watched him when his eyes were on your face. When he was listening to your voice Or waiting for your footstep. My dear, Kit is a man who has never been taught to be strong. But the makings are there. It you and he were married, out in the country some place, with dogs and horses—and children—"

"It's the sort of Paradise we've both dreamed of," she told him unsteadily. "But it's out of the question for us now."

Kirk smiled and reached beneath his pillow. "Is it, my dear? I think not! Here's the deed to three hundred and fifty acres on the eastern shore of Maryland. A place I had to take over years ago and which has not been occupied in a long time. There's a check sufficient to cover all the necessary repairs—and there are bonds sufficient to net you an income of ten thousand dollars a year And a trust fund for your children to guarantee their education and a start in life."

Marcia was speechless and she could not put out her hand to touch the papers he extended towards her Halsted watched her closely.

"You—are not disappointed, my dear?" he said at last, very gravely.

Marcia's eyes widened and she stared at him, her breath caught hard in her throat.

"Disappointed?" She marveled that he could have such a thought. "When I've been handed the key to Paradise!"

He smiled at her. "It's not Oleander Hall—or a million dollars."

"But it's far better for us," said Marcia swiftly. "It's independence—

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the thing that Kit needs. Responsibility—oh, Mr. Halsted, how can I thank you? There—there just aren't any words. Yet I'm so terribly grateful—"

She had slid down to her knees now, her face hidden against his pillow and she was weeping as though her heart would break. And Halsted, looking suddenly tired and old but with the mist of happiness in his fine dark eyes, put out his hand and stroked her dark head.

"Don't try to say it, my dear," he said gently. "The knowledge that I have been fortunate enough to be of some assistance to two fine young people who love each other is all the thanks I need. Run along, now, and tell your young man. And make your plans. I've a fancy to see a triple wedding in the garden tomorrow."

Marcia rose to her knees, and suddenly, impulsively, bent and touched his thin cheek with her lips. And then she was gone, the precious documents held close to her breast.

Chapter Twelve

THE OTHERS were in the drawing-room when Marcia and Kit came in. One look at their beaming, ecstatic faces almost made their news unnecessary. Kit said swiftly, "I want you all to know that Marcia has made me happier than I've any right to be. She's going to marry me."

"Swell!" applauded Mark, and wrung his hand. "Only you don't mind if we don't pretend to be breathless with surprise, do you, old man? I suspected as much the day she arrived and thought then that if you let this girl get away, you deserved to be horse-whipped!"

Eileen said joyously, "Oh, Marcia, I'm so glad! Then we'll be three brides tomorrow."

Marcia turned to Isabel and said, flushed and shy, "If you don't mind?"

Isabel, her hand tucked warmly in Pat's, said promptly, "Now, I resent that! I resent it deeply! Pat, am I such a monster that a wonderful girl like Marcia need be afraid to become a part of my wedding, on her own account?"

"Of course not, darling. Marcia only meant she might upset some of your plans—" began Pat.

"I haven't any plans," answered Isabel firmly. "Except to marry you so definitely, my angel, that not all the laws of Reno, Mexico and Florida can even dent the bonds!"

"You're a shameless creature, darling, which is probably one of the nine million reasons I adore you so much!" returned Pat happily, and they beamed at each other.

Caroline laughed, though there was a mist in her eyes. "My dear," she said to Isabel, "you haven't really answered Marcia's question."

"Marcia darned well knows it doesn't need an answer! She knows I'd be delighted for her to join our marrying bee. The more the merrier. Mother, how about telephoning Uncle Rick and making it a quartette?"

Caroline blushed but laughed. "Please show the respect due my gray hairs, you ungrateful brat!" she ordered sternly.

Isabel hugged her and said, her lips against her ear. "You don't mind my marrying Pat?"

"I'd mind very much if you didn't! I rather like the man myself," said Caroline.

And Pat, in grateful appreciation, bent forward and brushed Caroline's cheek with his lips.

"You two are completely unscrupulous," exclaimed Isabel, laughing. "You're completely upsetting one of the good old stand-bys of American humor—the mother-in-law joke."

"If I didn't admire my prospective mother-in-law so much for her own sake, I'd love her because of the lovely daughter she has given me for my wife," answered Pat with a little bow. "Matter of fact, I've never been able to understand how a man who loves his wife could help loving his mother-in-law out of sheer gratitude for having given him the wife."

"Gosh, but this is swell!" said Mark happily, shamelessly holding hands with Eileen, beaming at the others. "I feel like shouting or singing or

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otherwise giving way to an outburst of hilarity."

Fortunately, dinner was served at the moment and they trooped into the dining-room, where nobody paid much attention to the delicious meal served them. There was a great deal of laughter and chatter that even reached upstairs to the room where Kirk Halsted lay. He stirred a little in his sleep and a faint smile touched his lips.

After dinner the nurse came down to them while they were having coffee and said quietly, "Mr. Halsted is awake and very anxious to see you all together for a little while."

"But is he strong enough, nurse?" Caroline asked. "Wouldn't it be better if we went in one or two at a time?"

The nurse shook her head. She led the way up the stairs, Caroline and the others following. They went quietly, soberly, grave before this touch of awe-inspiring shadow that was destined to brush lightly the bright golden sunshine of their young and ardent happiness.

HALSTED, his hair freshly brushed, looking trim and tailored in his dark silk dressing-gown, nodded as they filed into the room. His voice was surprisingly strong and resonant. "You are more than good to come. I'm very grateful. I've a little task to be done, and I'll have to admit it has worried me a great deal. Will you please find seats and make yourselves comfortable? I will be as brief as possible."

There was a subdued murmur as they seated themselves and then Halsted went on.

"As you know, there is an estate of one million dollars, approximately, and the place known as Oleander Hall to be handed over to one of you four. I apologize now for the manner in which I chose to decide the heir. I ask you to believe that in my extremity I could think of no other way by which I could be certain that Oleander Hall would pass on to someone who would love the place and appreciate it. So I asked you here and subjected you to the spying of my loyal, devoted servants to whom Oleander is almost as dear as it is to myself."

He paused to rest and the nurse raised his head very carefully and held a glass to his lips. He drank, thanked her, and lay still for a moment. Then he went on, "I can't begin to tell you the happiness it has given me to see you all here; to know that you have enjoyed and appreciated Oleander. You have been most welcome. And to you, my dear," he spoke directly to Isabel, "in your new happiness, I know that neither Oleander Hall nor the million are of any importance now. You've stepped into a far greater heritage than I could have given you. But I want to give you, if I may, a small wedding present. I do not know to whom they formerly belonged. I only know that they are fine enough and beautiful enough to be almost worthy of you and I hope they will bring you very great happiness."

He held out to Isabel a small leather case. Her slim fingers pressed a spring and the lid snapped back. The lamplight fell on a coil of exquisitely delicate pearls before whose beauty Isabel was silent, incredulous. Caroline cried out with delight at the sight and after a moment Isabel said huskily, holding the worn leather case close the her breast:

"You've given me everything in life that any girl could want. I'd never have had Pat if I hadn't come. I don't know how to thank you—" She stooped and set her lips on his cheek in a little caress of affectionate gratitude.

"Thank you, sir—for everything," said Pat and his hand closed carefully over Halsted's.

Halsted lay still for a moment, smiling at their obvious happiness. And then he turned to Caroline and said, "Will you permit me, Mrs. Richardson, to offer you a small token of my very great esteem? Simply a bit of pocket-money in the shape of some bonds." He held them out to her and Caroline said, tremulously:

"It's not—I mean, I'm not entitled

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to anything. You shouldn't—"

"I want to—very much. Will you let me?"

Caroline accepted the package and thanked him with a voice that shook. Kirk smiled acknowledgment and after a moment he went on:

"To Kit and Marcia, I have already given what they wanted most of all—a farm and the necessary income to run it. Which leaves only Mark and Eileen. Come here, children."

THEY CAME, like the children he had called them, to stand beside the bed and he looked up at them. The young, slender childishness of Eileen, whose soft mouth was tremulous; Mark, tall and brown and stalwart, standing protectingly beside her. Halsted nodded, and it seemed to the others that there was a mist in his eyes.

"My dear children," he said so low that only Mark and Eileen heard him, "you will never know how very dear you are to me. I've watched you both, and I'm proud and happy to leave Oleander Hall in your hands."

No one save Mark and Eileen seemed surprised. Kit and Pat exchanged approving glances. Marcia and Isabel smiled at each other. And after a moment Kirk went on faintly, "There's enough money to run the place. Put in your drainage system, Mark—it's a very good one and I heartily approve of it. There's no reason in the world why you shouldn't raise citrus fruit, celery, lettuce and a great many other things that people have for years believed would not grow north of Florida. You, Eileen, stand shoulder to shoulder with him, as is a wife's duty. And there will be children—your sons and daughters who will grow up in the gardens.....He broke off, and after a moment he said lightly, "I do run on, don't I? I'm afraid I'm getting maudlin. You children run along now. I think I can sleep. All I ask of all of you is—be happy! Goodnight."

They filed out of the room on tiptoe as the doctor came in and joined the nurse beside the patient. Downstairs in the living-room Mark and Eileen, hand in hand, faced the others almost defiantly and Mark said, "I don't know how he came to do this—I mean leave the place to Eileen and me."

Pat chuckled and struck him a good-humored blow on the shoulder. "Don't you, old man? Well, it's all quite simple. You and Eileen adore the place and you'll be very good for it. Isabel and I would have been bored stiff in a month, and I dare say Marcia and Kit could think of more exciting places."

"The eastern shore of Maryland—horses and dogs—and cows and pigs and chickens, of course," said Kit blissfully.

"And an apple orchard climbing a slope so that in the spring the whole hill will look as though it had been snowed on—pinky-white snow," Marcia chimed in.

"They say the fishing there is good—and hunting, too, no doubt," added Kit.

"And all my life I've wanted to plant a perennial border and see what happens after the first year or two," said Marcia joyously.

Isabel slid an arm through Pat's, and pulled herself close against him, her head resting against his shoulder. "And I've always wanted to go abroad—oh, I went to Paris once with a chaperoned tour and it was terribly dull. Now I want to go with my husband and just wander anywhere in the world the fancy takes us. I don't care if we're gone years and years—a houseboat on the Nile—a villa at Algiers—darling, I want to go places and do things! With you, angel!"

"Just try going anywhere or doing anything without me, my lovely sweet," suggested Pat darkly. "Just try it, if you'd like to be spanked within an inch of your life!"

Isabel smiled at him. "Would you beat me, if I deserved it? You brute!" she accused, in a tone that made the word a caress.

"Within an inch of your life!" Pat assured her.

Mark cleared his throat and said sternly, "Hey, hey—would somebody come down to earth a minute and tell Eileen and me whether you hate us for inheriting Oleander?"

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"Hate you? Don't be a dim-wit!" protested Isabel.

"Frankly, I'm afraid we're a little sorry for you," Kit admitted.

Mark's eyebrow went up and he stared as though he thought Kit had lost his mind. "Sorry for us? You mean you don't want Oleander?"

"Nope," said Kit honestly. "I'd rather have Faraway Meadows! But of course Oleander is a very nice place."

"Nice?" Eileen's belligerent tone scorned the inadequacy of the word. "It's Paradise."

"Frankly, I wouldn't have it as a gift if I had to live in it the year around," said Caroline and quite obviuosly meant it. "It's a spooky sort of place."

Eileen and Mark beamed at each other and Eileen said "Darling, they don't mind our having Oleander!"

"I think they're glad!" said Mark as though he couldn't believe it, and they fell into each other's arms.

Caroline said a little later, scanning the packet of bonds, "I feel terrible about accepting these. A hundred thousand dollars in a five-and-a-half-percent trust fund! It will give me more than a hundred dollars a week!"

"Which, of course, is merely for pocket-money," said Pat firmly.

Caroline said huskily, "You're all so good to me—and I've been so disagreeable. I've insulted everybody here—except you, Pat, and that's probably because you weren't here enough to feel the edge of my tongue—and now you're all being so splendid—"

Isabel put her arms about her. "That's because we love you, darling. We all knew your bark was ever so much worse than your bite."

"Of course," said the others comfortingly.

And when Caroline had been convinced that they really meant it, and order had been restored, Eileen suggested, "Couldn't we sort of make this an anniversary? Couldn't we all spend the month of April here together every year? Sort of an anniversary of our greatest happiness? Mark and I would so love to have you!"

"I think that would be a splendid idea," Marcia agreed. "We'll come, won't we, Kit?"

"Of course! It's date!" promised Kit.

"And Pat and I wouldn't miss it for the world, would we, darling?" exclaimed Isabel happily.

"Not for several worlds, darling," answered Pat.

And it seemed to them all that an air of utter peace, of complete happiness, hung over the mellow old room as the sound of the frogs and the night-creatures crept in to them on the soft night air.

Chapter Thirteen

THE FOLLOWING day was as perfect as they had hoped but scarcely dared believe possible. The sky was turquoise-blue, broken with soft little puff-balls of clouds floating lazily and harmlessly in the west. The sun was golden, warm, yet there was a hint of freshness in the salt-tangy wind from the sea that lent an invigorating quality to the warmth.

The garden was at its best. Bowan and his two helpers had cleaned every fallen leaf, cut every faded bloom and trimmed the paths to a state bordering on fussiness last night. And yet shortly after dawn they were out again, raking the gravel, seeing to it that not so much as a weed dared show its face above the rich black muck-soil.

"No one ever had a more perfect wedding day," sighed Eileen ecstatically at breakfast.

"And no one ever had a more perfect bride." said Pat and bowed to Isabel. Whereupon Kit and Mark, stealing his thunder, each promptly bowed to his own fiancee and then beamed at the others.

"I still think it would be nice for you girls to wear your own frocks—" began Caroline. "That white tulle and net of yours, Isabel, is exquisite."

"It wouldn't feel at home here, darling," said Isabel. "Mr Halsted, bless him, was pleased when we suggested

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being married in costumes out of the attic and I think it's a swell idea. I wanted something with a bustle and leg o' mutton sleeves and dozens of little bows."

"I'd like hoop-skirts and crinoline," said Eileen, her eyes shining like those of an enchanted child.

"What about you, Marcia?" asked Isabel. And Marcia gave Kit a glowing look and answered quietly, "It doesn't matter a bit."

Breakfast was over and they trooped upstairs, remembering to be very cautious as they passed Mr. Halsted's closed door and promptly forgetting anything of caution when they reached the attic.

This was a huge place, with great boxes and trunks and tall old-fashioned chests bulging with discarded finery since the days when Olenader Hall had been a fine new estate and people had driven down from Savannah for balls and dinners.

The girls had wanted to make it a story-book wedding. But men had flatly refused to don costumes. So Isabel, Marcia and Eileen spent an hour or more rummaging in the attic and then retired to their own rooms to get the chosen costumes in readiness.

At three o'clock, the garden was drenched in sunlight that brought out the fragrance of the flowers to its fullest degree. At the foot of the garden path, a trellis had been erected and here an improvised altar had been set up, draped in white satin, flanked by tall vases of fragrant white stock. Space for the guests had been outlined with narrow white ribbons in the deep, cool shade of the giant trees that surrounded the garden.

A few minutes after three, the rector who had replaced Dr. Burgame took his position behind the improvised altar. There was little stir among the guests. Halsted, in his wheel-chair, his nurse beside him, had a place of honor near the altar.

Mark, Kit and Pat took their places. And then down the garden path, walking slowly, in step to the music played softly behind the border of the garden by five interested young Negroes, came Eileen. Her hair, loose about her shoulders, was held back with a wreath of tiny white blossoms. She was clad in a tightly fitted basque of faded ivory satin caught with quaint little nosegays of satin flowers where it fell from the young, rounded shoulders the skirt was made of dozens of creamy lace ruffles, each ruffle beaded with narrow ribbon and caught with pastel nosegays. Beneath the wide hooped skirt one caught now and then a glimpse of lace pantalettes above small feet laced into quaint old-fashioned black satin slippers.

There was a murmur of appreciation of the picture she made as she came down the path and slipped her hand in Mark's when he stepped forward to greet her.

MARCIA came next. She was lovely in a quaint old-fashioned lavender satin with quilted petticoats slashed and turned back to reveal the palest green underslip. On her head was a quaint hat of cream-colored chipstraw, pushed up at the back with a cluster of flowers, tilted forward over her pretty nose, and she carried a fan-shaped bouquet of lavender and pink sweet-peas.

When Kit took her hand and tucked it through his arm, the guests turned to Isabel, who had just come into view. Isabel had wanted a dress with a bustle and leg 'o mutton sleeves and a tight basque. She got it in a lovely brocade, very stiff and rich and rustling. Her hat was a poke-bonnet of green taffeta and her flowers were Killarney roses in a loose, simple sheaf that Bowan had cut for her an hour before dawn, when the dew was still crystal clear in their lovely hearts.

Grouped about that improvised altar at the foot of the garden path, they made an unforgettable picture. Like something out of a fairy tale, murmured the guests while Caroline looked on, proud and happy, yet not quite able to keep back the tears.

As the rector opened his Bible and began to read the service, it seemed that everything in the garden held its breath to listen.

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EPILOGUE

IT WAS another April at Oleander Hall. Once more Bowan was grubbing happily in the garden, digging strong brown fingers lovingly into the rich black muck, his ruminative eyes on the rows of lusty young seedlings, pausing now and then to look down the long row of the Ghost Walk to that small, serene white marble house before which it was his privilege every morning to place fresh flowers.

Tomorrow the guests were coming. Mr. and Mrs. DeBardeleben were hurrying home from abroad to keep their rendezvous with memory; Mr. and Mrs. Kit Grant were coming from their farm in Maryland. They hadn't been sure they could come, for Mrs. Grant's baby son was only four weeks old. But they were coming because her doctor had said the trip wouldn't hurt the baby, since he was such a fine, lusty young one. So the garden must put on its most perfect, shining face.

Bowan looked down towards what had once been marshland, striped with the curious gray-green of cypress trees. Now it was being carefully and scientifically drained by Mr. Mark, so that they could put in citrus trees and lettuce and tomatoes and celery. Oleander Hall was going to produce again. Bowan nodded, pleased with the thought. And suddenly, even as the thought reached him, he straightened and listened, his head bent a little. Hadn't that been a strange, new cry from the house? A beginning of life cry? The young mistress—now! He thought of her with tenderness almost as though she had been the young daughter he had never had. He bent again to his work.

Half an hour later Mark came down the walk. Mark, looking haggard and strained, yet with a strange, shining sort of glory about his eyes that was almost as though candles had been lit behind them.

"Well, Bowan," he said and his voice rang like the blowing of many trumpets, "she wanted you to be one of the first to know. My wife and I have a beautiful little daughter."

"Praise God, sir," said Bowan simply. "The mistress? The little mistress is—all right?"

"Eileen's glorious!" said Mark and his voice shook a little. "When she heard the first cry of the baby she said, "Be sure to put down the time. Maybe she'll grow up and be interested in astrology, and I can tell her what hour she was born.'"

Mark's voice laughed at her and adored her and asked Bowan if she were not the world's most perfect treasure. And Bowan, who loved Eileen as though she had been his own, agreed with him.

That night when they let Mark into Eileen's room for a few minutes, to marvel at the exquisite perfection of their little daughter, he said, "Don't you think we'd better wire the others to put off their visit a little while?"

"Oh—no!" pleaded Eileen. "I want them to see my baby—and I want to see Marcia's baby—and hear Isabel tell all about the Taj Mahal by moonlight, and the Sphinx and the Pyramids—oh, *Mark*, watch her yawn!" she broke off, enchanted, before the miracle of that tiny yawn. "Oh, Mark, isn't she wonderful?" she whispered, awed and a little frightened by this miracle of love. She reached out a hand for Mark's comforting clasp. And between them the baby slept, tiny hands curled, an absurd fluff of dark hair above its small, scarlet face, while its mother and father hung above it in ecstasy....

"Yes," said Bowan as he raked the lawn and paused to lean on his rake and look down at the draining marshland. "Yes, Oleander is producing again. You'd like that, Mr. Halsted, sir. But then you know about it, don't you? I've kind of felt like you did and that you felt happy about it all along."

From the direction of the Ghost Walk a soft little wind crept past Bowan's cheek and Bowan nodded, satisfied, as he went on with his work.

THE END

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Easy To Take

by

Ann Mason

For the first time that Marty could remember, nothing mattered to him but the girl sitting across the table. The girl who disliked him so intensely.

MARTY TOSSED his key carelessly on the hotel desk, then picked it up quicky when the gorgeous blonde suddenly appeared from behind the switchboard. She was the new look in desk clerks and something that didn't belong in a place like Centerville. Grinning, he presented his key to her with a flourish, and when she took it, peaked at his watch surreptitiously. He had seven minutes before his appointment and that was plenty of minutes in which to try and make a dinner date with this lovely. Marty was lonesome.

It wasn't that he was bowled over with conceit, it was simply that all of his life he'd had so little trouble snaring any girl whom he met that he happened to like. And always Marty liked the beautiful ones. The little black address book locked in his desk, read like the listing of a top model agency.

Certainly girls seemed to find Marty easy enough to take. They naturally liked his tall, well built body and his chestnut hair that lighted a dark red in the sunshine, they even seemed to find his strong, homely face attractive.

This morning Marty had dressed with care to impress the old gentleman with whom he had his appointment. His brown gabardine suit was the acme of his tailor's art, and the knot in his soft blue tie was calculated to make the Duke of Windsor hang his head in envy.

The lovely blonde on the other side of the desk looked at him with a strange dissection. The sartorial splendor had missed the bull's eye by a wide, wide margin. Definitely this girl didn't like what she saw. Marty could feel her antagonism reach right across the desk to slap him.

"I haven't met you before, have I?" he asked slowly, completely baffled by her attitude.

"No," she answered and her voice was soft music. "Fortunately."

Wham! But Marty achieved his smile with all the stops pulled out. "Do you always carry a tomahawk tucked in the belt of your cute little yellow dress when you meet strangers?"

"Very amusing, Mr. Martin," she said contemptuously. "I'm frankly surprised that you haven't discovered better quips in New York."

MARTY STARED at her. This had never happened to him before. Not that he made a habit of picking up beautiful blondes, but the girls he met didn't glare at him with evident dislike. He'd done nothing to this girl. He was lonely and stuck here for a long time, if things went well this morning, and he wanted to know her. Tonight he'd like to take

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"You're still a brat, Miss Prim," Marty said, but his eyes were friendly. "If you weren't, you wouldn't be acting like this."

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her to dinner and maybe watch the lazy summer moon glide through the night.

"I can get an introduction to you," he suggested.

"Oh, really," she snapped back.

"Well," he tried again, "suppose than you tell me what's wrong with me? I don't have hang nails," he raised his well kept hands for her inspection. "I've never been caught practicing arson on Tuesdays. Some people have liked me."

She turned away from the desk. "Why don't you go back to them, Mr. Martin?"

For a moment he just stood there staring puzzedly at her back. Then he began to do a slow burn. There wasn't the time now to jerk her out from behind the tall switchboard and demand an explanation for her stinging dislike. But he'd get around to her, he promised himself as he strode out of the hotel.

The clock over a small cafe informed him that he had three and a quarter minutes to make his appointment. As he walked quickly down the tree lined Main street, swinging his brief case, he began thinking of his conference with Mr. Wyatt. His brows knit in concentration as the breeze ruffled his hair.

The Wyatt Ice Cream Company here in town had been in operation for thirty-five years and while old John Wyatt had kept up with the times in his equipment, he'd stayed in the horse-and-buggy-days in his promotion and sales. As a result, Wyatt's plant was working at about one-tenth its capacity and making no attempt to sell the nearby towns.

Mutual Dairy Products Company of New York had sent one of its brighter young men up to Centerville to pursuade John Wyatt to sell out. The young man had failed miserably because he hadn't taken into account that this company had been in the Wyatt family for all of these years and was a far more real and personal thing than just machinery and freezing capacity. It was then that they sent up Marty, their brightest young man.

It was essential that Wyatt like him because if the old man sold to Mutual, Marty would remain in Centerville to run the plant for two years. As soon as Mutual took charge, sales had to be quickly sparked and Marty had a plan in his brief case. A popularity and beauty contest for Miss Ice Cream Cone of 1949. There'd be excitement and plenty of fan-fare and since each dish of ice cream, or a double cone meant one voting ballot, the place would float in vanilla, strawberry and chocolate. A natural for a town like this.

MARTY SMILED at the red-head at the reception desk and gave his name. She plugged in, listened, then told him that it would be a few minutes. Marty put his brief case on the leather couch and sat thinking about his all important interview.

"Mr. Martin," the red-head called and gave him a high voltage smile. "Mr. Wyatt can see you now. It's not," she added softly, "going to be all ale and cakes for you. Watch Hank, the old man's nephew and his girl." Her red mouth tightened into a thin straight line and she wasn't quite so pretty.

"Thanks," he grinned and made a circle with his thumb and forefinger.

One glance at sharp eyed Mr. Wyatt and Marty knew that he was going to have his hands full. Mr. Wyatt was a small thin man with parse gray hair, which he didn't try to comb over his bald spot. He wore a seersucker suit, two sizes too large.

"You were right on time, young man," Mr. Wyatt nodded his approval and snapped shut the hunting case of his big gold watch. "Hobby of mine being on time. Don't like to wait."

"Most of us don't, sir," Marty sat down across the desk from Mr. Wyatt.

"I'm not sure that my town will like your company running my plant," Mr. Wyatt shook his head, his gold rimmed glasses slid a half inch down his sharp nose. "Town's used to my family. I'm afraid your

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company will be too big, too impersonal. My plant's been mighty important to this community for thirty-five years, kids all grew up on my ice cream." He looked around his compact well furnished office and smiled ruefully. "Had me a designer modernize my building and machinery right after the war, haven't ever felt comfortable in the darn place since. Seems like as how I liked my old roll top desk."

"I represent a fine company, Mr. Wyatt," Marty told him earnestly. "We're human, but we're still business men. A plant like yours should serve the neighboring towns too. If you sell to us, we'd try to be a real friend to the community, but we'd also try to make people ice cream conscious so we could give more jobs to the local people." He reached down for his brief case and realized with annoyance, that he'd left it in the outside office. Well, he didn't need it to introduce his Miss Ice Cream Cone.

"I'm the man who'd be running your plant for two years, Mr. Wyatt," Marty said, "and I'd work closely with you to absorb your slant. I like this town already and I've a plan worked out for our initial campaign. This is a natural, we would...."

SHE HAD come in through the door behind him and Marty didn't know the antagonistic blonde was there until he heard her make a disdainful sound. He got to his feet and faced her. She *would* have to make an entrance just as he was warming up in his sales talk to this tough old man.

"Lo, Polly," Mr. Wyatt beamed at her. "Know Mr. Martin? Polly Shepherd and," he paused and the look in his eyes behind his glasses was suddenly inscrutable, "my nephew, Hank Wyatt.

"Hello, Miss Shepherd," Marty smiled and ignored the cold nod, her acceptance of the introduction. He wished that the reception room redhead was standing there right now, her attitude toward him at least hadn't held disdain. "Glad to meet you, Hank," he held out his hand.

"Likewise," Hank grinned, then the broad shouldered blond enveloped Marty's hand in his enormous paw and put on the pressure. Marty braced himself against the bone crushing pain and did what squeezing back he could. If he ever got his hand again and could still use it, he'd smash it into this giant's handsome face. Hank's lips stretched in a smile but his eyes were as cold as a fish's. At last he released it and Marty saw that his cords and shirt were a size too small so that his muscles would bulge.

"Dressed to go to a dance this morning, Mr. Martin," Hank winked at Polly before he guffawed. Polly looked startled and for an instant when she looked at him, Marty thought he caught begrudging approval in her eyes.

It was incredible to him that this lovely girl could be Hank's. It didn't make sense that she'd go for this big ox.

"Hurt you?" Mr. Wyatt asked with interest.

"Scarcely," Marty made himself chuckle as he tucked his half-paralyzed hand carefully in his coat pocket. Even the old man should realize that shaking hands with his nephew was like getting caught in a vise. "That trick of Hank's used to be used when the fresh kids first arrived at boot camp, but after six weeks we usually managed to make men enough of them, and they dropped it."

Marty liked the dull flush that spread across Hank's face and slid up into his blond hair, and the way Hank took an involuntary step toward him, his fists knotted into hams. But he didn't like the intimate way in which Polly put her hand on Hank's arm to restrain him.

"Careful, Mr. Martin," Polly warned coldly, "Or you might get your nice suit torn to ribbons."

MARTY'S FACE hardened in sudden anger and his dark eyes smoldered. "I'll take that chance, Miss Shepherd," he said

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curtly, then turned to Mr. Wyatt. If buying your business is contingent upon playing tug-of-war with your nephew, we might as well go find us a nice broad alley. Otherwise, I'd like to talk business with you."

"Haven't you told him?" Hank demanded. He crashed his fist down on his uncle's desk. "I am going to have two weeks in which to show my uncle that I can build up sales as well, or better, than you. I can do in two weeks what you'd take six months to do. I am going to step sales fifty percent in these next two weeks."

"That," Marty said, "I got to see."

He understood now Polly's antagonism. To her he was a monster waiting to snare Super-man's chance and gobble up the old family plant. She acted as though she thought he was an old time villain complete with the black mustache. Well, maybe he could buy a false one and look the part for her.

Mr. Wyatt made a steeple with his fingers. "Hank feels, Mr. Martin, that the business should remain in the family. He feels that he's a good business man with a flare for sales and promotion. He's asked for this chance and I am giving him the next two weeks. If he fails to produce what he's promised, I shall sell my plant to your company without further delay."

Hank put his arm around Polly's slim shoulders and Marty almost winced. The guy was a handsome brute, certainly right at home with Polly. Marty doubted if his Miss Ice Cream Cone contest could up the business fifty percent.

"I can't fail—now," Hank said softly and looked mushily into Polly's eyes. "It's for Polly too. Now, that she's going to be Mrs. Hank Wyatt." He winked at Polly again.

"We'll wire you, Mr. Martin, the outcome of Hank's success," Polly told him with a superb confidence.

"And I shall be the first to congratulate you," Marty's hand was beginning to feel life again. "I'll stay around to see this miracle job of sales promotion. Frankly, I'm doubtful."

"Listen, Bud," Hank shouted, he reminded Marty of a bull about to start a rampage. "In the Army we gave directives and the men followed through. No fuss, no feathers. Today I'm bringing in a go-getter sales force who'll follow through on *my* directives, just like that," he snapped his fingers. "Stick around, Bud, and learn how a really smart guy operates."

"What's that about my sales force?" Mr. Wyatt asked sharply.

Hank laughed. "What sales force? Those old moss backs think Lincoln spoke himself on his birthday this year. All your old men do is go chin with the druggists in town and ask about Annabell's operation in the ice cream parlors. My boys are going to *sell* 'em. For every gallon sold last week, three go this week."

OLD MAN Wyatt winced, but he didn't say anything, if he had misgivings he was keeping it to himself and letting Axle-brain have his fun. Hank was forgetting the little matter of spoilage and that he had to increase the market generally, not just load his outlets. Well, a two week vacation would be nice, Marty thought, and he'd have a chance to know Polly. He wondered where the red-head fitted into this and decided that a date with her might be informative as well as enjoyable.

"Well," Marty smiled at them all impartially, "I'll run along. I'll be at the hotel, Mr. Wyatt, if you want to reach me. Good luck, Hank, if you run into a snag let me know." He ignored Hank's ominous growl. "If you're going back to the hotel now, Polly, I'd like to walk along with you."

"I'm not," she said flatly.

The reception room was filled with a crowd of sharp looking young men, trying hard to achieve the eager-beaver type that the simplified books on salesmanship recommended. Marty grinned at them as he went to the red-head's desk.

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"What gives in there?" she whispered.

"Is it important to you?" Marty whispered back.

"Don't be dumb," she countered.

"Hank's going to put the business on its feet in two weeks in a whirlwind high-pressure sales drive." He saw the spark of excitement flash in her eyes and leaned on the desk. She probably was a mine of information that he needed. "What are you..." he stopped as he suddenly changed his mind. Until he got straight with Polly he'd not start his investigation. Polly was his Operations First.

"What am I what?" the girl demanded.

"Named?" his eyes laughed at her. "I can't just call you, 'Hello, Beautiful.'"

"Can't you?" she drawled. "If you must be formal, it's Midge."

"I'll call you, Midge."

"I'll hold my breath," her eyes approved him.

Marty hurried out and stood for a minute looking at the red brick building, it was nice. He spoke pleasantly to a few of the townspeople, who eyed him suspiciously before they spoke back. He selected a big elm and leaned against it. If his hunch was right, Polly would talk a few minutes to Hank and his uncle, then she'd leave Hank alone in the office with the old man, she'd come out alone.

She did. She came out, hesitated on the steps, then ran lightly down them and turned toward the hotel. She was so lovely that Marty's heart gave a lurch. This time she wasn't going to freeze him, not before she talked things over.

At the corner, he casually took her arm as she stepped down from the curb and she drew back startled. Her eyes, meeting his were blue ice and he could feel her stiffen.

"You and I, Polly, are going someplace and talk undisturbed."

"Are we, Mr. Martin?" she controlled her annoyance. "Right here on the street corner?"

Marty smiled. "It's your town and the gutter's all right by me."

For the first time he caught a flicker of a smile, "I know just the place."

SILENTLY, they walked up the tree lined street. He watched the sunshine vie with the gold of her hair, and lose. Her arm felt firm and warm underneath his hand and he had to stop himself from drawing her closer to his side. He wanted her close beside him for some strange reason. It was with shock that he realized he was drawn to Polly as he'd never been drawn to a girl before. Always it had been simply for fun and because he enjoyed beautiful girls. They were nice to be with. But they knew and he knew that it wasn't for real. It would be ridiculous if he had to come to Centerville to find the real thing with a girl who disliked him instantly and who seemed to belong to a dumb young man. This was stupid, Marty told himself, it couldn't be.

Polly must have seen something of the tumult inside of him on his face, because she looked up at him in puzzlement. She said nothing, she just led him into a candy store with an ice cream parlor in the rear. He followed her into a booth, so small he had to sit with his long legs outside.

"This is an opportunity for you to taste Hank's product, Mr. Martin," Polly said and he saw the amusement in her eyes. They told him that this was a nice joke on a sophisticated New Yorker in his spick and span new gabardine suit who probably had expected to be led to a dusky cocktail lounge. He smiled when she ordered two Polly Prims from the fat proprietor.

Marty looked down at the dish shoved in front of him and shuddered. It was heavy glass, long and wide, filled with four scoops of different flavored ice cream, then piled high with fudge, marshmallow, caramel, whipped cream, nuts and cherries. It was a ghastly sight.

The fat proprietor poked a thumb at Polly, "I named it for her. When she was a kid she made it up herself. Some mess." He strolled back

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to the front of his store.

"Some mess," Marty repeated and drew a long breath before he dived in. The ice cream was excellent, but the goo surrounding it called for a strong character. Somehow, without exactly understanding, he knew that this was a test for him. What eating this mess could possibly prove, he didn't know, but he took big bites and manfully swallowed.

At long last, Marty pushed his cleaned dish aside, there wasn't a nut nor a gob of whipped cream left. "It would have been nice if you'd been a child with simpler tastes," he smiled.

Polly laughed and her eyes were softer and very friendly. "I was a brat," she confessed.

He gave a cigarette for her, lit it, then held his lighter to his own. He looked at her through the flame. "You're still a brat, Miss Prim," he said. "If you weren't, you wouldn't want to put arsenic in my fudge sauce because you're afraid I may put the hex on Hank's efforts to sell ice cream."

She crushed out her cigarette before she looked up at him. "Why not? Mr. Wyatt's company is just another job to you, but it's Hank's whole future. He's all he has. And," she hesitated, "it's all I have."

"Stop it," he said gruffly, "before you break my heart. Hankie boy is strong on brawn," he glanced at his hand ruefully, "but on sales promotion he's going to be a feather weight." Marty chuckled.

"Why don't you go away?" she asked plaintively. "And just forget Centerville and the Wyatts? Then," she leaned toward him eagerly, "Hank could have a real chance without this pressure you're causing by waiting around. That business is his heritage and it means his pride and love for his family to him."

"With a little soft music you'll have me crying. In the first place, I work for Mutual Products, I try to do what I'm ordered to do and I've been ordered to close this deal with Wyatt. In the second place, Hank is jumping into something he knows nothing about and he's too stupid to admit it." He watched the storm clouds gather in her eyes. "If it weren't I, it would be some other guy from Mutual. The important thing is—where do you fit in, Polly? I mean," he tried to keep his voice even and not let her guess how important her answer had already become to him. "Are you seriously going to marry that—Hank?"

SHE LOOKED at him for a long time and he thought that her face whitened. "My father owns the hotel, he and Hank's father, before he died, were pals. I've known Hank all of my life and, since we were in grammar school, he's considered himself my best beau. He wouldn't ask me to marry him when he went into the Army because he felt it wouldn't be fair to me." There was pride in her voice. "When he got back and found I was still single, he—he took it for granted that I had waited for him." She touched his hand in her eagerness to make him understand Hank. "He had a right to think it, I can see that. He'll grow up with responsibility and he loves me very much. He really had a right to believe I waited for him."

"You let it drift," Marty told her angrily. "You were too much of a softie to tell that hunk of man that you weren't in love with him and never had been." He got up abruptly. "Come on, let's drive into the country."

She protested all the way to the hotel and even when she gave him the keys to her car and got in beside him, she was still saying she couldn't go off for a ride with him.

Marty felt fine. She looked so wonderful in her perky little yellow dress, that he was as happy as a couple of larks. In two weeks he'd probably be fired if he lost this deal with Wyatt, but it didn't matter. For the first time that Mary could remember, nothing mattered to him but the girl beside him, the girl who didn't dislike him quite so much.

They drove along the countryside in the warm sun, until they stopped for lunch at an Inn, mellowed with

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age, which stood by the side of a gossipy little brook.

"I shouldn't have come with you, Marty," Polly was contrite. "Hank will never understand and he'll be hurt."

"Oh, tell him you were working on me to go back to New York," he took her arm and they ran up the steps. Hank. What did that bone crusher matter? Tonight, Marty thought, there'd be that big June moon gliding through the sky. It had been a long, long time since a girl had been able to make him feel moon struck, not since he was a kid in high school and sent his first girl a Valentine, dripping with lace and bows.

The Captain seated them at a table on the screened porch overlooking the brook. Marty glanced at Polly with a diabolical glint in his eyes. She'd give him a Polly Prim, would she? And he proceeded to order a lunch fit for a stevedore. He saw her almost blanch.

"What's the matter?" he asked innocently. "Surely that concoction you handed me only whetted your appetite, little Miss Prim? A hearty repast is exactly what you need."

"Touche," she murmured and her eyes brimmed with laughter at herself.

She was plodding through her fried chicken when he took pity on her. "Let's save the rest for dinner," he suggested.

AFTERWARD, they drove slowly through the lazy afternoon and it was a shock to him when she told him she must get back to Centerville and a date with Hank. Marty scowled in annoyance. He didn't want Hank thrust back into his thoughts. Not when he was thinking about a place outside of Centerville with big lawns and trees, a place as old and mellow as the Inn with Polly standing in the open door to welcome him home.

He remembered once, in the South Pacific, when a group of officers were talking about their wives and girls and falling in love, how he'd been sure that when the real thing came along he'd know it. Now, he knew he'd been right that night. He did know it. And he knew, too, that it was too soon to tell her all that was in his heart. She'd think it was a tired old line or else she'd laugh. Neither of which he could bear.

When they reached the hotel, Polly put her hand on his, "I've had a lovely, lovely time, Marty," she said softly. "I'm sorry I was a nasty brat this morning. You seemed like a monster from New York who was going to take everything away from Hank."

"Polly," his voice was husky, "just how important is Hank to you."

She looked steadily into his eyes for a long time, "He's the man I'm going to marry, Marty," she finally said and her voice sounded choked to him. She quickly opened the car door and was gone.

"The hell you are," he muttered and hurried into the hotel after her. But she wasn't in the lobby, nor behind the desk. He even walked around behind the tall telephone switch board and scared a strange girl. "Oh, sorry," he murmured and got out of there.

MARTY SPENT a long tedious evening in the lobby reading the papers, waiting for Polly to come back. She came in with Hank at ten o'clock and he jumped up to meet her.

Hank glowered at him. "You're the smarty pants I want to see," he exploded. "You stay away from my girl."

"Oh, Hank. No!" Polly said and looked appealingly at Marty. What did she want him to do, go hide in the elevator?

"I don't think Polly actually is your girl, Tarzan." Marty threw the words at him and watched the anger boil up in him. "And whenever she'll ride, walk or crawl with me, I'm there, brother."

Hank threw a haymaker that Marty ducked in time, but Hank caught him on the eye with a hard left, then dropped him with a looping right. Marty crashed a table and

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a filled ashtray spilled over him.

He wiped his mouth and climbed to his feet. Hank's lips were parted in a grimace, like a hungry wolf who's tasted blood. Marty feinted with his left, then smashed in with his right. It was like trying to fell an ox with a pussy-willow. The guy was granite. He only shook his head, bellowed and came in with his right swinging.

"Stop that!" a high voice yelled and Hank turned, leaving himself wide open. Marty just managed to pull his punch in time and they both faced Mr. Wyatt.

Mr. Wyatt looked calmly around at the smashed table and the shattered lamp. "That will be fifty dollars, Mr. Martin, I'm deputy sheriff. Next time you and Hank fight, it will be a hundred dollars and ten days in jail."

Marty straightened his tie and wished a man didn't look so ridiculous with a black eye. He handed over the fifty dollars.

Mr. Wyatt accepted the bills and eyed Hank. "Get it out," he ordered and Hank sheepishly counted out thirty-two dollars. "I'll owe you eighteen," Hank said.

"You'll pay it now in full, or go to jail," Mr Wyatt countered impersonally.

Polly ran to the desk and returned with the balance. Her action gave Marty a jab of pain somewhere in his chest. Why did she have to be the little mother to this clown? Without speaking, he strode out into the warm night. The moon, big and glowing, was up there in the sky all right, riding high, and Marty felt lonely, more lonely than he ever had before. What good's a moon without the girl?

He got something for his eye in the drug store and then walked back to the hotel. The elevator was out of order, the boy told him solemnly and he started up the stairs to his room.

HE WAS finishing the second flight of stairs when he saw her waiting in the hall. Polly didn't speak. She just looked at him, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Hello," he said quietly.

"Hello," she answered so faintly he had to stoop to hear her. "I'm sorry about your eye," she reached up and touched it gently with her cool fingers.

Then, without knowing how it happened, she was in his arms. Her soft lips, yielded against his. The turbulent suddenness of their first kiss, beat against his heart with a primitive inexorable force like the surge of the sea. His lips burned against hers for a long hungry moment and her hand crept around his neck to pull him closer to her. And time stood still.

She leaned against him and buried her golden head against his heart. She stood there for a long time, trembling. At last when she spoke, her voice was low and husky. "So this is what it's like."

"Yes, darling," he answered quietly. "This is what it's like."

She moved back out of his arms and looked at him, her eyes like star dust. "I'll have this anyway," she whispered and moved back out of the reach of his hungry arms. "No, Marty. I'm going to marry Hank, but I had to know if there really was love at first sight. There is," she concluded simply.

"You're sure, Polly?" he demanded.

"I'm sure," she closed her eyes. "Please go, Marty. Please go to New York. Don't stay now and make it harder for us."

His face was bleak and his eyes burned down into hers. "Stop. You and I are going to be together for the rest of our lives, darling. We didn't find this to lose it. I've been waiting for you, Polly, just you. Only, I didn't think I'd ever find you. I'm not letting you go now. We'll tell Hank in the morning, or I'll tell him myself, then I'll come to you."

She shook her head. "No, Marty. I can't. He counts on me. He's not very good at things and he knows it and needs me. Leave me alone—if you love me. Go back to New York." Be-

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fore he could stop her, she slipped by him and ran up the stairs.

For hours he smoked cigarettes and stared out of his window. He planned how things would work out, because he could never lose her. Now that their love had swept their hearts, nothing could keep him from her. He could feel again the surrender of her lips on his, and the sweet yielding of her slender body in his arms. And he knew then, that when love comes to a man it takes all of him.

AT NINE-THIRTY the next morning Marty went to the hotel desk and asked the clerk if Polly were down. Jonas smiled expansively and informed him that she had gone out at eight with Hank. "There's going to be some doings," Jonas confided and Marty nodded knowingly, knowing nothing. He left word that he was in the dining room when Polly came in.

Why didn't Polly wait to talk to him before dashing off with Hank? She couldn't have meant it last night when she said she was still marrying Hank, she couldn't want Marty to go back to New York and leave her. If she loved him, she couldn't.

The coffee tasted like mud, the toast like dry sawdust in his mouth. He was signing his check and fumbling for change when the waitress giggled and put a big two foot square of paper before him. He smiled at her automatically, the paper reminded him of the posters circuses tack on telegraph poles proclaiming the arrival of the "greatest little show on earth." But Marty wasn't in the mood for any circus this morning, all he wanted was to find Polly to....

There, staring straight back at him, was a big picture of Polly. It was below to inch letter which stated, "BEAUTY AND POPULARITY CONTEST FOR MISS ICE CREAM CONE OF 1949." Below Polly's picture the poster screamed, "PRETTY POLLY SHEPHERD, YOUR CANDIDATE? VOTE EARLY! VOTE OFTEN!" Then in smaller letters the explanation that with every dish of ice cream or double cone bought, the purchaser was entitled to one vote.

Without thinking, Marty crushed the paper into a tight ball, his face burned with outraged anger. His brief case with his plan for this contest, he remembered now, he'd left in the reception room of old man Wyatt's office yesterday morning. The pretty red-head, Midge, had looked in it and come up with his plan and given it to Hank. Hank had grabbed it. After his fight with Marty he'd sent Polly up to play him for a sucker. He could still hear her low, haunting voice say, "Please go, Marty. Don't stay and make it harder."

Sure, get going, Marty, you big dope. Let Hank steal your promotion plan so he can cinch the plant and secure her future. Polly knew last night that this was coming out this morning when she'd let him take her into his heart. The come on, older than Time. Marty, the smart guy—the sucker.

"Is that all, Mr. Martin?" the waitress looked frightened.

"That's all," he answered curtly.

But it wasn't quite. He'd see Polly once more, he'd make it a farewell she'd remember. Then he'd find Hank and give him a fight to remember, too. All he wanted was to settle those two accounts and get out of Centerville. But by the time he got up stairs to his room and had jerked out his suitcase, he changed his mind. Doggedly his jaw hardened and his dark eyes were steady. No jerk was going to steal from him and get away with it, nor was a girl going to betray his love with a kiss.

Marty got Mr. Wyatt's number and listened to Midge's voice become wary when she learned who it was. She was in this thing up to her pretty neck. When he asked about his brief case she assured him that it was safely tucked in her big desk drawer.

"You went through it, didn't you, Midge?" his voice cut across the wires. "You gave my contest plans to Hank."

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She hesitated before she laughed, "Why, Mr. Martin, of course not. The contest is all Hank's idea. All of it." She went on to explain that the contest was actually between her and Polly and she'd told Hank that he really should marry the girl who proved to be the most popular. There was an edge to her laughter.

"Oh, lovely," Marty muttered aloud as he slammed down the phone. He grabbed his hat—he'd find Polly.

MR. WYATT was leaning up against one end of the desk down in the lobby, chewing on a soggy cigar. "What do you think of Hank's new wrinkle," he asked, his sharp eyes watching Marty carefully.

"I like it fine," Marty said. "Why wouldn't I like it fine when I...." he stopped. A contest like this one had to be handled with delicate care, otherwise the town would be strewn with hurt feelings, petty jealousies and half the people would be sore at the other half because of the rivalry between candidates. The only thing they all end up with was their hate for Wyatt's ice cream. By the time Hank managed it with his clumsy hand, he'd wish he'd never swiped it. It was better, far better, to let Hank sink with it.

"Going to stay around for the excitement?" Mr. Wyatt asked.

"Sure," Marty laughed. "This I got to see."

It took him most of the day to catch up with Polly, but he finally found her and wished he hadn't. She was on a platform in the center of the park that edged the town. Hank had certainly done a job, the platform was decorated with festoons of bunting and balloons jerked in the breeze. The town band blared martial music while the townspeople shouted hilarious enthusiasm.

Marty mingled with the crowd and learned that already partisanship was running at white heat, each one seemed to have a favorite candidate the girl he *knew* should be voted most beautiful and popular. This would end in a feud and Marty grinned.

He looked up at the platform and watched Polly parade up and down. She was so beautiful in her white bathing suit that Marty caught his breath. She happened to catch his eye and he could see the flaming color splash her face and the guilty embarrassment that spilled into her eyes. He felt sick. She didn't belong up there, she wasn't the type to be in a thing like this and he realized that only her love for Hank could have forced her into it. Midge was parading in a black bathing suit now, and loving it because it suited her.

Restlessness made him take a long walk outside of town. Suddenly, around a bend in the road, he saw the house of his dreams. Nestled in a grove of fine old trees was a large sprawling red brick house, old and mellow. It had large expansive lawns and he caught a glimpse of the gay gardens in the rear. He stood there for a long time looking up at the house. Almost he could see Polly standing there in the open doorway, waiting to welcome him home. A girl was there and her hair, in the distance, seemed golden as she looked at him. She probably thought he was crazy standing here in the late afternoon looking longingly at her home. He turned back to town.

The streets were all deserted and the lobby of the hotel was empty when he came in. A lone girl at the switchboard informed him that the whole town had gone to the big picnic with fireworks tonight, to launch in Miss Ice Cream Cone.

"Oh, fine," he said and went to his room. The elevator boy dug up a radio and he stretched on the bed, listening to the music. Probably he had been lonelier in his life, but he didn't remember it.

THE NEXT morning when he came down early, the lobby was buzzing. Polly had accidently fallen into a bed of poison ivy at the picnic and had landed flat on her face. It was a terrible case and the poor girl seemed out of the contest.

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That morning he hadn't realized how much losing the contest would mean to Polly, but four days later it began to penetrate. On every side he heard about her disappointment, he listened to the sympathetic, "Isn't it a shame" until he decided the whole town was nuts. Somehow, she'd hooked up the winning of this silly contest to her future happiness.... with Hank.

And it was then that Marty went to work. If she wanted to be Miss Ice Cream Cone, then he'd give it to her. He wondered if any man had even given so ridiculous a thing to any girl and so proven his love for her? After this was over, he better get to a good psychologist to save what mind he had left.

Marty bought ice cream until there wasn't any ice cream left to buy. He bought it for all the kids he could find, he bought it until it ran out of their ears, then he started sending gallons and gallons to the hospital, who made their own. With every double cone or dish, he cast another vote for Polly. He became the talk of the town while Polly was still confined to her home with the poison ivy. He began getting notes from her in his letter box at the hotel. At first they asked him to please come and see her, then they urged him to come, and finally, they demanded that he come. But he ignored them and her and bought more ice cream.

Finally the night came when his votes for Polly were piled up so high, no one could catch her, and Marty began throwing things in his bag. He could just make the eight-six train for New York and get out of here.

For a moment he thought about leaving a note for Polly, but there was nothing he could say. He didn't hope she'd be happy with Hank, he didn't hope she'd ever be happy with anyone but him.

The station was more crowded than he'd thought it would be, people good naturedly kidded him about his campaign for Polly. And he realized that he'd stepped in and stopped the friction in town over the contest; everyone was interested in the man who'd go berserk over ice cream for a girl.

Then Marty saw Hank came running into the station. He dropped his bag and strode to meet him, his fists clutched, his dark eyes glinting battle.

"Look, guy," Hank began.

"You look," Marty snapped and swung with his right.

It was a beautiful fight while it lasted, and it lasted until they heard Wyatt's high voice yell, "Stop it!" They stood before Wyatt while the crowd laughed and cheered.

"One hundred dollars, Mr. Martin," Wyatt waited until Marty had counted it out, then he half smiled. "And ten days in jail. Come along, boys."

The jail was comfortable enough, Marty decided. Hank was in the next cell, loudly bemoaning this incarceration right at the end of the contest. Why hadn't he taken the train, Marty wondered, why did he get into this fight. Now, he'd be fired to top everything else.

THERE WAS a commotion in the outside corridor and Marty looked up from his cot. Polly was standing there outside his cell door, smiling. She was beautiful in a white sports dress and its pink accessories, and when she looked at him her eyes were touched with star dust. Marty wanted to tell her that she'd stopped at the wrong cell, but he didn't. He got up and slowly walked to the cell door. Mr. Wyatt was standing beside Polly, grinning for the first time.

"Mr. Martin," the old man said, "things are straightened out now. Hank's confessed that he stole your plan for the contest because he was desperate. He was running to catch you in the station to tell you about it when the fight began. I'm selling my plant to Mutual Dairy Products and you take charge immediately. I...."

Polly gently pushed Mr. Wyatt away. "It's my turn, now that I have him cornered in a jail," she smiled. "This time he can't escape me."

"Oh, Polly," Marty said her name

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softly, just liking the sound of it.

"I told Hank I loved you the day after you, you kissed me in the hall," she reached through the bars for his hands and he grabbed hers tightly. "I didn't know until later that Hank had stolen your plan and I didn't know he was throwing me into the contest until I saw that poster. If I hadn't fallen into that poison ivy, or if you had answered even one of my messages, we could have straightened this out."

Midge's voice sounded very small, "I pushed you in the ivy, "she confessed. "I wanted Hank so darn much and I knew you didn't love him."

"Hank," Marty called, "it's all right about the contest. And I'll have a job for you, if you want it."

"I sure do," Hank yelled, "Thanks guy, this fixes things up for Midge and me. And no more fights."

Marty smiled at Polly and stooped down to kiss her through the bars, but she moved back. "Not that way," she said softly. "You're in my custody to keep the peace," she unlocked the cell door and he took her quickly, hungerily into his arms. "And next time, darling, don't stand staring at my house from the road. Come on in."

"I'll be coming the rest of my life," he held her close to his heart when he kissed her. And after a while he added, "My Miss Ice Cream Cone of 1949!"

THE END

The Candle Flare

by Lalia Mitchell Thornton

Above were stars, and the planets gleaming,
Never I looked to see;
Clear in a window a candle gleaming
Gave me reason for hopeful dreaming,
Clear and steady its light was streaming,
And I whispered: For me. For me.
Gone were my fears, banished my doubt,
Captive was I, her slave devout,
Watching the signal as it flamed;
And then — I paused in the dark, ashamed,
Broken and beaten, for two were there,
Their faces lit by the waxen glare,
And he bent to kiss her, the clumsy lout,
And laughed, as he blew the candle out.

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Bad Luck Groom

by

Celia Lockwood

Cynthia was so glamorous that Anne couldn't blame Giff for being crazy about her. Only, it was hard to take.

ANNE'S VOICE spun out to a thin whisper as she repeated Giff Granger's name. *Because, now, she knew who Giff was,* and her heart curled up inside her.

She'd thought, "This can't be happening to me! I can't be falling in love with a total stranger." But she knew it was true. Knew it because when he walked into her shop just a few minutes ago, she'd taken one look up into his blue eyes and said to herself, "This man has got to be a brother of a client, or the best man, or something.... anything but the bridegroom!"

She'd got just that far in her thinking when he'd told her that he was Gifford Garfield Granger, Third. Which meant that he was the Bad Luck Groom. Everybody had read of the Bad Luck Groom.

He said, "I see you recognize my name," and his voice was bitter. "This time I want things to come out right. Cynthia, my fiancee, thinks it's all nonsense and is willing to marry me, at a simple ceremony without frills. But I want a wedding arranged because I have a plan of my own. Cynthia suggested your name.

"She said that, young as you are, you have a reputation for having the wedding you arrange precede happy marriages. Cynthia would have come, in person. Only she's on the radio, you know. Cynthia Cosgrove, the singer." He spoke proudly. Everybody from Coast to Coast knew the dulcet speaking voice and the heart-warming voice of the beautiful Cynthia Cosgrove.

"Oh!" said Anne, her heart giving up the fight.

Anne was little and blonde and cute. She had good family connections and she'd gone to all the right schools—until her father had died, three years before and she had found out she was penniless. She knew all the right people. She knew how to dress and act. But she didn't know how to make money.

It was Irene Storme who had suggested that she might make a living, arranging weddings. "You've been a bridesmaid so many times darling," she said, a shade too sweetly.

WITHIN six months, Anne was a success. Anne was making money. Anne was making a reputation for herself of being a shrewd business girl. Which delighted Anne, because at heart, she was just a softie, a romantic dreamer.

Everything had been wonderful. Till now.

Giff was waiting for her to say something. She dragged her thoughts back swiftly and stammered "I—I'll make all the arrangements, of course. When—when did you say you were going to be married?"

"To-morrow," he told her tersely.

She stammered, "W-what? But—but that's impossible! It takes weeks to arrange a fashionable wedding. Nobody will come. There won't be any time to get out wedding invitations."

She was horrified at herself, because she had hoped this wedding would turn out to be indefinitely

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postponed or something, just like the rest had been.

He came over to Anne. His eyes were intense as he said, "The wedding I want you to arrange for tomorrow, won't come off. See? It'll be just a dress-rehearsal. If somebody is putting me on the spot so far as my brides are concerned, I want to find out who it is. If I'm just bad luck for brides, I want to know, that, too.

Anne wished she could concentrate better on what he was saying.

"So I want you to be my rehearsal bride," he was concluding astoundingly.

"THE WHOLE thing is absurd," Anne said firmly. "First of all, the reporters will go to the City Hall to see if we've gotten a wedding license. Nobody will believe this on the level, if there's no license."

He took a document out of his pocket. "Here it is. All ready for your signature and vital statistics. We can have our tests and then all the red tape will be straightened out."

His mouth stopped smiling at her astonishment and thinned to a grim line. "I'm in earnest about this. My last fiancee met with an unfortunate accident, you know. Steering wheel of her car went wrong suddenly and inexplicably. I don't want anything like that happening to Cynthia."

Anne stopped spining. She snapped, "Oh. So it's dangerous to be engaged to you, is it? Yet you want me, a total stranger, to risk my neck for you. No, thanks."

He shook his head. "Nothing will happen to you. I've seen to that. Besides, you know the score. You're warned in advance."

Anne snapped snagrily, "Why not tell Cynthia the whole story ad let her play tethered goat for you?"

"No. Cynthia thinks it's romantic, being engaged to marry a man who has had bad luck with three brides. But she doesn't think there's any danger connected with being engaged to me. I can't risk losing Cynthia. I love her too much."

ANNE SAW red. She sputtered, "Of all the..."

He interrupted, "I'll pay you ten thousand dollars if you will be my rehearsal-bride, Miss Norwood. And I want you to arrange my real wedding with Cynthia, to take place a month from now." He looked at his watch impatiently. "Well, what about it? Is it a deal?"

She couldn't believe her own ears when she heard herself say, "Why not, Mr. Granger? After all, it's an excellent business proposition."

He said, "Come on then. We have to go complete formalities on this wedding license."

Anne looked at him. She said, breathlessly, "Are you sure you want things this way, Mr. Granger? What about Cynthia? What is she going to think when she reads in to-night's paper that you're going to marry me to-morrow?"

He seemed embarrassed, for the first time. "The engagement hasn't been formally announced. Mine and Cynthia's, I mean. She—she understands about—this. When this engagement—blows up, she will announce her engagement to me. You see?"

Anne saw, right enough.

Cynthia wanted some publicity. Giff was rich and charming and dynamic and there had been newspaper publicity about him. It had been two years ago that his last fiancee had been killed in that automobile accident, but if Giff got engaged to another girl and was about to marry her, and something happened...That would bring Giff right back to the front pages.

And then Cynthia's engagement to him would rate a lot of perfect publicity.

"Where do you want this wedding to take place?" she asked him coolly. He couldn't know how she fought to keep her voice aloof and amused.

"Oh—the Waldorf, I guess" he told her confusedly. "Make it look authentic. Hire the Jade Room for the reception and have the caterers do their stuff. Get flowers and er-flowers."

Anne thought, "This is absurd.

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"Oh, so it's dangerous to be engaged to you," Anne snapped. "Yet you want me, a total stranger, to risk my neck for you. No, thanks."

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This is crazy. I've made a nice, safe, interesting life for myself, since Dad died and left me penniless. I'm likely to toss it all away. Because I like the gleam in a tall man's eyes! Because I've fallen for his charm. I won't do it. I won't make an utter chump of myself." But, even as the thoughts cascaded through her mind, she was calling the newspapers and making the announcement.

THEY HAD lunch at a quiet little restaurant where the food was good and no one they knew would be around. The marriage license with all formalities attended to, was in Giff's pocket. The newspapers with the announcement in the society columns already were on the streets.

She thought, "How cosy it is, to sit opposite Giff at a table-for-two."

Giff was saying, "Oh, I forgot to give you this. More window dressing. Hold out your hand."

He had a beautiful diamond engagement ring, she saw.

As he put it on her finger, she got a thrill clear down to her toes. Which was utterly fantastic, because he was saying, "It's the ring I'm going to give Cynthia. Take good care of it, won't you?"

Anne had to count to ten, so she wouldn't throw it in his face. She managed to say, quietly, "I'll take excellent care of the ring."

Then, because she was furious and angry, she dared ask the question which had been dinning at her mind for all the time since she first had met Giff. "What happened to your other brides, Giff?"

He looked grim.

"I got engaged to Beth when I was twenty. She ran off with another man on the very day she was to have married me." He added slowly, "She left me a note saying someone had told her something about me which—frightened her."

Anne couldn't think of anything to say.

"I met Gloria. She went swimming with some friends three days before we were to be married. She got caught in the undertow." His voice died away and he crumbled a bit of bread angrily between nervous strong fingers.

"And Dorinda was killed in an automobile accident," Anne finished for him. "Well, really, you know, it isn't such as imposing list after all. Why did the newspapers make such a lot out of it? Where did you get the bad-luck-bridegroom tag tied to you?"

He said slowly, "That's just it, Anne. I have an idea somebody doesn't want to get married."

He seemed to guess her thoughts. "It's a funny thing, Anne," he said slowly. I fall in love easily enough. I'd like a wife and a home and a family. But I didn't love any of these girls enough to have it blight my life when something happened to them. Oh, I don't mean I'm heartless. I grieved at the time. But—I got over it. Only, I'm not having anything happen to Cynthia. She's different."

"Oh, is she?" thought Anne angrily.

She asked crisply, "Have you a lot of family? Mother, father, sisters?"

Giff shook his head. "I've been an orphan for years. My uncle is my guardian. Uncle Lee. He's tops. Salt of the earth."

"Does he handle your estate? Do you get the handling of your own money when you marry?" asked Anne interestedly.

He laughed uproariously. He had a booming, hearty laugh.

"You've been reading too many detective stories, my dear!" he chuckled. "No. Uncle Lee doesn't handle my money. He turned the estate over to me on my twenty-first birthday. Which was three years ago. Nobody stands to lose anything if I get married. I suppose really it's simply chance, Fate, whatever you want to name it. But I had to be *sure*. Before I let Cynthia announce our engagement. I must find out if someone is pulling this jinx stuff on me."

"Yes," said Anne forlornly. "Yes. You can't have anything happen to Cynthia." And she sighed.

IRENE said, "Darling, you look simply wonderful! Nobody would dream that wedding dress hadn't been

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made for you. I think this is all too-too thrilling. Think of you dating Giff Granger on the quiet all this time and none of us guessing! And it's *so* romantic to think you arranged your own wedding, too."

Anne adjusted the filmy veil and thought, "I'm so nervous, I'm ready to scream."

She'd been waiting for somebody to try to kill her. It wasn't such a comfortable feeling. The night before, Giff had taken her to see all the people closest to him. His Uncle Lee, a tall handsome man who informed Anne that he had been in love with Giff's mother first, but his younger brother had won her heart. After the death of his brother and the woman he had loved, Uncle Lee had transferred his affection to Giff. She liked Uncle Lee.

They'd gone to see Giff's chum, Larry, who was going to be his best man. Larry was a rollicking, good-natured chap who insisted on kissing the bride-to-be.

They'd dropped in at the broadcasting company to say hello to Cynthia.

It made Anne feel sort of sick to remember how Giff's face had lighted up when he saw Cynthia.

Cynthia was so beautiful and so filled with glamour and personality, Anne couldn't blame Giff for being enthralled with Cynthia. Only it was sort of hard to take. Anne was so wild over Giff herself.

Someone tapped at the door.

Anne started nervously. Was an attempt going to be made on her life? She had to try twice before she could say, "C—come in."

She knew that the man in the uniform of the hotel pretending to polish the fire extinguishers at the end of the hall, was the detective Giff had hired to guard her. But she was nervous just the same.

CYNTHIA Cosgrove rustled in, all pink taffeta and charm. She looked at Anne with eyes that looked more green than gray. "I'm not crazy about this!" she burst out. "I'm not crazy about it at all. How does Giff know you'll back out at the last minute, if nobody attempts to kill you?"

Anne thought, trying to be amused, "Well, she doesn't mince words! And Giff is crazy if he thinks she doesn't know the exact score. She's smarter than I thought. She is the one who figured up this little scheme to kill one bird or another. Headlines, if another bride doesn't marry Giff. But why did she pick on me? Why send Giff to me?"

She got the answer to that, almost immediately.

"Somebody told me you were the type of girl who was strictly business. That you went all-out for success. I pictured somebody quite different when I suggested to Giff that he go to you...

Anne couldn't take much more of this. She snapped, "If nobody takes a shot at me or throws a poisoned arrow or tips me out a window before the ceremony, I'm to faint when I get to the improvised altar. That will end this particular farce and the headlines will be terrific. That ought to suit you."

Cynthia blinked. "You *are* hard, aren't you? After all, I guess that you were the right one for the job. But remember. If you try to pull any double-cross, I'll stop the wedding myself. So don't go getting any ideas!"

Cynthia rustled out of the room, leaving Anne feeling as if she'd been run over by a truck.

"Mr. Granger is outside, ready to escort you to the Jade Room," the maid told Anne.

SHE GOT a shock when she came out and there was Giff's Uncle Lee waiting for her. She'd expected Mr. Granger would be Giff. But of course not. A bridegroom wasn't supposed to see his bride till the actual ceremony.

"Hello," she said.

Uncle Lee looked at her with an odd intentness. "Ready, my dear?" he asked.

She nodded.

"We go down in this elevator at the end of the corridor. Private affair they had installed for this purpose,

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they tell me. To see that a beautiful bride in all her marriage-finery doesn't have to be stared at by the general public.

They reached the elevator and she stepped in, before she saw that the elevator didn't look at all like a luxury conveyance for a bride. Instead, it looked more like a freight elevator.

She was so frightened all at once that there didn't seem to be air in the world to breathe. Uncle Lee had clanged shut the door with an awful finality and they were swooping downward.

Uncle Lee was smiling to himself, and there was such a feeling of evil in the place that she felt stifled with it.

The thought flashed through her mind, "Giff was wrong about his uncle being so nice. But Giff was right about all the brides having something awful happen to them. "On purpose!"

Uncle Lee stopped the elevator between floors. He turned as smiling face toward Anne.

ANNE WAS so scared a giant hand seemed to be squeezing her heart.

"Giff's mother was engaged to me. She was frivolous and horrible. She broke my heart and laughed at me when I protested her throwing me over for my brother—Giff's father. She thought there wasn't anything I could do about it. But there was. Oh, yes, certainly, there was! The only thing she cared about, was her son, Giff. When she and my brother were killed in a train wreck, I was very glad. Because I had meant to kill them both myself. When the proper opportunity presented itself. But with them gone, all that was left was Giff."

She thought, "He's mad. He's off on that one subject and nobody has guessed."

Through a thin singing in her ears, she heard him go on, "I figured this out. I didn't want her son just to *die*. That would be too easy. Instead, I dreamed up this idea. At first I just meant to scare out any girl who wanted to marry Giff. Beth was easy. She was so young. And I told her that Giff hated woman and was just marrying her to kill her."

Anne thought, "I've got to do something. I can't just stand here and let this horrible old man wipe out my life."

She darted forward unexpectedly. She gripped the elevator handle. The car shot upward.

Uncle Lee was very strong. She found that out as he pushed her so hard she fell against the side of the car. "Don't be silly," he said, running the car down again and keeping on going this time. You can't escape your Fate, you know. Only it has to look like an accident. I'd meant to push you down this shaft. But the safety doors can't be tampered with. A pity!"

He spoke almost querulously.

They came to a stop at the floor where taxis drive in.

Anne flung herself wildly at the elevator door and got it open. To her surprise, he did not try to stop her. Instead he hurried after her and she felt him give her a swift push.

Too late she saw the taxi speeding around the corner in a hurry to deposit a fare at the lower level door. She screamed as she fell. Screamed Giff's name.

Someone darted forward and caught her and jerked her out of harm's way, just in time. Someone held her close in his arms and kissed her. Oh, how he kissed her! Giff. Giff had saved her life!

There was excitement and flurry and dimly Anne saw Uncle Lee being hurried off by two policemen.

Giff stopped kissing her and she felt as if she'd gone to heaven and then been dashed to the bottom of a cliff. Because his kiss was so wonderful and because when the kiss was over she remembered that she was just a rehearsal-bride.

Everybody was talking at once. Giff was saying over and over, "Anne, Anne, I'll never forgive myself! I thought you were safe with that detective on the floor watching. But Uncle Lee knocked him out so

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there was nobody to watch..."

Cynthia gasped, "Giff, we're not engaged any more. Do you understand? I thought it would be wonderful publicity, to be engaged to you. But I'm not taking any chances on being engaged to a man who is a jinx. Not on your life!"

With a final rustle of pink taffeta skirts, she was gone.

ANNE GASPED, "Giff, I'm so sorry! But—but maybe after a while she'll get over her fright and..."

He wasn't listening. He was saying, "Anne, I've found out something. Something wonderful. Something tremendous! I'm in love with you. Do you hear that, Anne?"

There was such a crowd that the police had to call out the reserves, and everybody was pushing and shoving to get a look at the beautiful girl in the wedding gown and the handsome man in festive attire, who kept on holding the bride close in his strong arms.

But Giff seemed to think he and Anne were alone. He didn't stir. He said, "Are you game to take a chance on marrying a man who's been a jinx to brides up to now, Anne? Will you make this a real wedding and be my real bride?"

Anne hesitated. The big burly policeman nearest her, who was battling the crowds valiantly to keep them back, said, "Lady, I don't know what this is all about. But for Pete's sake, say yes, so I can get rid of this crowd!"

Instead of replying in words, Anne held up her lips for another kiss.

THE END

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I'll Marry You Tomorrow

by

Doris Knight

For the first time, Kit mentioned Brett. And, before this, he had been scrupulous in avoiding the name.. Though he knew all about him, of course. Everybody in Frampton Village would have seen to that!

MARY WAS trying on her wedding gown when Mrs. Watkins came racing in breathlessly to tell Tyra someone wanted her on the telephone.

Tyra's Aunt Bess said, "Tell 'em to call again!" and though her voice was muffled because she had pins in her mouth, she seemed very decided. But then, Aunt Bess always sounded as if what she said, was the very last word. Usually it was. But not today.

Tyra said, "I'll go answer. Aunt Bess. Nobody will see me if I go out the back door." She hurried off before Aunt Bess could do any more objecting.

So it was that Tyra answered the phone in her wedding dress, and

She thought "This is the man I thought I loved. This!"

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heard Brett Wentworth's voice for the first time in three years.

It was a wonder she didn't faint then and there, but somehow, she managed to say lightly, for Mrs. Watkins' benefit, "Why-hello there. Where are you?" Carefully she didn't mention Brett's name.

In Frampton Village, Brett Wentworth's name wasn't very popular. Not since he had walked out on Tyra three years before, on the very eve of their wedding in the vine-covered church on the hill!

Tyra thought she had forgotten Brett completely. She'd worked hard enough at forgetting, heaven knows. She had done everything everybody had suggested. She'd faced pity and gossiping whispers and thinly-veiled satisfaction. For Tyra had been the most popular girl in Frampton Village ever since she was fifteen, and some of the other girls, and their mothers, were jealous of her popularity and beauty and charm. She had worked hard at her uninteresting job in Randall's Hardware Shop, trying to get so tired she wouldn't think. She had kept busy every minute of the day and she had read magazine stories half the night, so she could sleep.

At last, after about a year and a half, she told herself firmly that Brett Wentworth was simply yesterday's newspaper so far as she was concerned. And she began to look around for a new heart-interest.

Christopher Randall came back to Frampton Village about that time. He'd been away at college in the State's Capitol. Kit Randall, as everybody called him, refused pointblank to go into his father's hardware store as the elder Randall had expected. Instead, Kit insisted that Frampton Village needed a Flower Shop. He argued Tyra into coming to work for him. It had been fun, launching a business together. Love had come to them as gradually and naturally and inevitably as breathing.

Tyra was marrying Kit at high noon the very next day.

And in her ear was Brett's familiar voice, setting fire to her heart on the moment!

THAT WAS what startled and horrified her so much. She still could be emotionally stirred by Brett Wentworth, whom she ought to hate!

Brett was saying, in the well-remembered jaunty fashion, "I'm at Pottersville. Darling, I've got to see you. It's the most important thing in the world for both of us that I do see you."

"What is it?" asked Tyra, carefully keeping her voice casual, on account of Mrs. Watkins. She knew Mrs. Watkins was doing a wonderful job of listening. She was glad that Linna didn't seem to be around.

"I can't tell you what it is, over the phone. But it's important darling. Terribly-important. Darling, listen to me. You've got to believe what I say. It wasn't my fault that I walked out on you, three years ago. Your Uncle Luke gave me my choice of making a sneak for it and not communicating with you, or—going to jail for something I didn't do. Darling, are you listening?" he broke off to ask curtly.

"Yes," quavered Tyra.

She managed to add, "My Uncle Luke died last year."

Brett said, "I'm sorry about that." He didn't sound sorry. He added, "Now look, Tyra. I've got to see you and I know you wouldn't want gossip all over Frampton Village, the way there'd be, if I went there. So you meet me at..."

She could hear a slight rustling sound as if he unfolded a sheet of paper and was looking at it. "Meet me at 46 Ivy Street at ten o'clock. Can you do that?"

The wedding rehearsal was to be at seven. It would be over long before ten. Pottersville was only six miles away. A bus left every half hour.

All the time, Tyra knew she was going to meet Brett. But she hesitated, on the brink of saying so. Feeling rather terrified that Brett had only to whistle and she'd come racing to heel.

He said, sharply, "Tyra, listen to me. This is important! This is the most important thing you've ever pro-

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mised to do, in your whole life. Meet me, ten o'clock, Ivy Street, Portersville."

"All right," said Tyra in a whisper. "Good bye." She fumbled the telephone back in place then he went on talking for Mrs. Watkins' benefit, shielding the telephone with her own body, so Mrs. Watkins couldn't see the connection was broken.

"We're closing the Flower Shop tomorrow, but I'll see what can be done about rushing you an order of crysanthemums and gladioli and winter carnations, tonight. Goodbye."

She shouted to Mrs. Watkins, "Thanks a million for calling me to the telephone, Mrs. Watkins. It—it was a twenty-dollar order for flowers. I—I guess Linna isn't at the shop."

To her surprise, Mrs. Watkins went right along with that. "No," she said flatly. "I don't suppose she is. She's over at Portersville half the time. Or so I hear. Linna not being the type of daughter who confides in her mother!" She sounded angry and grieved.

THE NAME, Portersville, practically sent Tyra into dithers. So she didn't stop for any more chatter. She went racing out the back door and across the back yard and through the small gate, being very careful of her wedding dress meanwhile, and into the house.

She was trembling and her heart was thudding madly.

Just hearing Brett's voice could do that to her! The knowledge terrified her.

Aunt Bess asked curiously, "Who was it?"

"A customer from out of town. He wanted twenty dollars worth of flowers, and it seemed Linna wasn't at the shop," Tyra replied trying to sound commonplace and casual.

"Linna ought to stay at the shop," Aunt Bess murmured. "You have done most of the work there, ever since the Flower Shop opened."

Tyra caught a glimpse of her reflection in the long pier glass that Aunt Bess had wheeled in from her own room, so they could get a full length view of the wedding dress for the last fitting.

Tyra saw a girl with honey-gold hair, soft and shining and shoulder-length. A girl with wide-spaced gray eyes and lovely, wistful face. A girl with crimson cheeks and excitement shining out of her eyes. Tyra thought, "I haven't looked like this, since the awful day when Brett walked out on me, and so far as I was concerned, the world came to an end."

Luckily, Aunt Bess was all absorbed in taking in the waistline of the wedding dress. "There!" she said, placing the last pin. "I'll get right to work on this and then everything'll be ready."

As Tyra very carefully stepped out of the wedding dress, Aunt Bess went over things aloud. "Kit's attended to the flowers to decorate the church and the house. The wedding cake is made and iced. The chickens have been boiled and the meat shreded, ready for the salad. I've got the sandwich bread ordered from Harper's, and the Bon Ton ice cream parlor has the order for the ices made in fancy shapes. Roses. Lilies. Carnations. Tonight I'm setting the table for the buffet with Mrs. Watkins's best cutwork banquet cloth. I'll go over the rugs in the front room with the vacuum cleaner first thing in the morning. And..."

Tyra broke in, because she just had to ask the question, "Did Uncle Luke hate Brett Wentworth always, Aunt Bess?"

Aunt Bess dropped Tyra's wedding dress and had to pick it up. She said, "Whatever made you think of THAT MAN, Tyra?" She never referred to Brett by name, but always as THAT MAN.

Tyra cheeks flushed rosier than ever but she went on, resolutely, "Oh, I don't know. I just happened to think about him. I wondered about Uncle Luke, that's all."

"Your uncle was a very shrewd judge of character," snapped Aunt Bess. "No. He never did like Brett Wentworth. From the very first, he distrusted him. And he was right. We never told you, darling, but if Brett

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hadn't run out on you when he did, your Uncle Luke would have forbidden the marriage!"

"Why?" Tyra's voice came out a thin whisper.

"Because your Uncle Luke found out that Brett was a crook. That's why!" Aunt Bess was tense with anger at the very memory. "After your Uncle Luke gave Brett Wentworth a job in the bank as paying teller, Brett repaid the trust your uncle showed in him, by *stealing* some bonds he was told to take to the vaults!"

TYRA ASKED, fighting to keep her agitation under control, "Why didn't you tell me this at the time, Aunt Bess? Why did you let me go on thinking that Brett just—walked out on me?" She had to stop. She was on the verge of tears.

Aunt Bess said primly, "Your Uncle Luke thought it best not to tell you, Tyra. He made me promise not to tell. He made good the bonds Brett stole, and said not to ever tell you about it. But naturally, now that you're getting married tomorrow to a fine man...." She let her voice trail off.

"How much was it?" Tyra forced herself to ask.

"Oh, I don't know," fluttered Aunt Bess. "Not a great deal, I think. About a thousand dollars I think it was."

Tyra had put on her blue wool that Kit liked best, and was shrugging into her coat. "I'll run down to the shop and attend to that order," she said in a muffled voice, as she snatched up her scarf and hurried off before her aunt could protest.

Outside, in the crisp, cold air, she felt better. Less like fainting. She thought, "How funny. I raced over to Mrs. Watkin' house just wearing my wedding dress, and I didn't feel cold a bit."

She concentrated on that, because she didn't want to think about Brett.

Brett a thief?

She conceded that he might have been. Brett had come back from Europe very disillusioned and at loose ends. He fell in love with Tyra and wanted to marry her. So he tried to adjust his life to Frampton Village standards. He took a job in the bank where Uncle Luke was Head Teller, just to please Tyra. But he hated every moment of it. He said he felt like a bear in a zoo, with the people outside the bars and he in a cage inside. He had wanted a thousand dollars desperately. To start a radio-shop of his own. He'd gone to Uncle Luke and tried to borrow that much money, about a week before the wedding. Uncle Luke had refused angrily, telling Brett to stick to his good job and stop whiffling around like a weathervane in the wind. Brett had been furious and talked wildly about getting the money even if he had to steal it. Brett had been rather violent about things, anyhow.

Tyra did the tasks she had meant to do, before that all-important telephone call. But she did them automatically, with her mind all on Brett—

She met people. She talked to them. She hoped she made the right answers. Because her mind wasn't on what she was saying. She was thinking about Brett.

FOR THREE long years, she had shut Brett out of her mind. Tall, brown-eyed, red-haired Brett, with his exciting good looks, and his charm of manner and his impatience and his wild love-making.

She hadn't dared think about Brett, for fear her heart might turn to brittle glass which might break if so much as a breath of added sorrow came.

"I'm over Brett completely," she told herself. "I'm in love with a fine man, Kit Randall. His people are respected in this town. Which is more than you can say for Brett's folks."

She went to the Flower Shop, for all at once, the compulsion to see Kit was overpowering.

All at once, she couldn't think how Kit looked. Which frightened her.

Kit wasn't around. Linna Watkins was trying to sell some table decoration flowers to Mrs. Mills. She was being very languid about the whole matter.

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Tyra took over competently and made an excellent sale. Linna was yawning. "Kit said he'd be back by noon," she said disgustedly. "I had a date this afternoon. And I only said I'd help out if I could work part-time."

"Where did Kit go?" asked Tyra. Linna didn't know that. Tyra said she'd take charge of the store during the afternoon and Linna went off, still yawning.

Tyra didn't see Kit till the wedding rehearsal that night. He came racing in at the last minute, to take her to the church. He murmured something vague about having to go out of town to get some pink tiger lilies.

All at once Tyra felt as if she were meeting Kit for the first time— He wasn't somebody she knew, as well as she knew her own name. He wasn't the man she was going to marry tomorrow. No. He had turned into a total stranger. And it was all Brett Wentworth's fault. He had done this to her. He had destroyed her security.

She looked at Kit appraisingly.

He wasn't too terribly good looking. He had merry blue eyes and a lot of thick tan hair and a lean face and a mouth which always was laughing. He was tall and his shoulders were broad. He was jolly and he managed always to make everybody have a good time, when he was around. There was something awfully dependable about Kit. You knew you could trust him, all the way. But beside that, there was a dynamic quality about him which made him a general favorite.

Now that Tyra really was looking at Kit, she saw he had twin worry-lines between his brows. Surely they hadn't been there all along! Or hadn't she noticed? And she saw, too, that his lips were sort of tense and he seemed worried and jumpy.

SHE ASKED him if anything was the matter, and he almost bit her head off. Which wasn't a bit like him. Then he apologized beautifully, and drew her into his arms for a tumultuous kiss which left her breathless and wiped out all memory of Brett Wentworth.

"'Scuse it, please!" he said. "Touch of last-minute bridegroom jitters I guess, angel. Brides shouldn't have a corner on the jitter-stuff, should they?" He looked at her narrowly. "Speaking of that, darling, you seem a little on the jumpy side yourself. Anything cooking that Kit could stir?"

She coaxed a smile to her stiff lips. "Not a thing, dear," she managed to say lightly.

He went on after a little pause, "Linna Watkins told me that somebody rang up while you were trying on your wedding dress. Somebody who wanted a big order of flowers. I didn't see the order listed on our books."

Tyra's mind went off on a vacation, for a moment, leaving her totally defenseless. Her cheeks were very red as she said the only thing that came into her mind. "I'm getting pretty doggoned sick of the way that dopey Linna Watkins pries into our affairs. I wish we hadn't hired her at the flower store."

"It was your idea, sweetness," said Kit sounding a bit grim. "You figured Mrs. Watkins was such a gossip and all. She kept talking about you and that—that fellow you were engaged to. So we hired Linna and I must say I wish we hadn't, too. She's a—a droop!"

"A good-looking droop however, with her blonde hair and big amber eyes and white skin and curves!" said Tyra, not having the slightest idea what she was saying.

Because she was practically breaking to pieces inside.

For the first time, Kit had mentioned Brett! Not by name, of course. But he had referred to him as the fellow she had been engaged to. And before this, he had been scrupulous in never mentioning Brett. Though of course, he knew all about him. Everybody in Frampton Village would have seen to that!

Tyra thought frantically, "He's jealous! I never realized that Kit was jealous of Brett. Could he know that Brett called me this morning?"

They drew up in front of the church and there was no time to pur-

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sue the subject further.

Everything was confusion from then on. Aunt Bess was bossing everything, as usual, and getting things balled up by her orders. But at least, she was having a wonderful time. Which is more than could be said for the prospective bride and groom.

Tyra was keyed-up enough to scream at the slightest provocation.

And Kit, for the first time in his good-natured life, was not smiling. His face looked tense and strained. Mr. and Mrs. Randall beamed happily, all unware of the tension. They loved Tyra and Tyra adored them. Marrying Kit meant marrying a family. So far Tyra was concerned, that was good. That was very, good. She'd been an orphan so long, and though she loved Aunt Bess dearly, her aunt was so busy bossing the town that she didn't have a great deal of time to spend on Tyra.

AS THE girls and men crowded round Kit and Tyra with the usual last-minute wedding jokes, Tyra remembered how awful Brett's folks had been His father ran the local pool-haul. It was rumored that there was a race-wire in the back room and that was how he got the money he lavished on Brett. His mother was away most of the time in the nearby big city. She was a hard-faced, ugly-souled woman who frightened Tyra.

Brett's father had been killed in a drunken brawl while Brett was overseas. No one knew what had become of his mother.

Yes. The Randalls were very very different!

Linna came racing breathlessly in at the last moment. Tyra thought, "I've never seen her look so animated and alive! I wonder why?" Her thoughts drifted to wondering how she'd come to include Linna in the bridal party when she didn't even like the girl. She decided that Linna, for all her apparent languor and droopiness, had a way to getting what she wanted. Which was odd..

The wedding rehearsal moved along. The girls, and Aunt Bess, insisted that it was bad luck for the bride to take her own part in the rehearsal. She could practice the service. But not the walk up the aisle. Someone else had to double for Tyra in that.

Somehow or other it was Linna who walked up the aisle, her pale face aglow with sudden animation which made her look almost beautiful. Tyra thought, "Can Linna be in love with Kit?" and the idea was strangely disquieting. She brushed it aside as impossible. But it kept recurring to her mind in a most disturbing fashion.

The wedding rehearsal at last was over. Nothing seemed to concern Tyra in the slightest. The festive preparations which had seemed so terribly important before that telephone call from Brett, suddenly meant nothing at all.

She looked at Kit's familiar, good-looking face with his bright blue eyes and his firm, square chin and his whimsical mouth which had kissed her so often and so wonderfully, and she thought with a trace of panic, "I can't marry somebody I don't know!"

Her thoughts raced on, "I can't meet Brett. No matter how important he says it is. I can't meet him. That part of my life is done. Finished. Brett jilted me I haven't heard one single word from him in three long years. I was seventeen then, I'm a very grown-up twenty, now I'm a different person. I must not go to meet Brett. It wouldn't be fair to Kit.

But all the time, she knew perfectly well that wild horses couldn't keep her away. She tried to think up excuses to get away early in case Kit wanted to go down by the river's edge and pitch some woo.

However, that turned out to be unnecessary. Kit said, almost angrily, it seemed to Tyra. "I'm letting you out here at your garden gate, Tyra. No late nights for either of us. After all, tomorrow is a pretty important day for us, isn't it?"

"Yes," whispered Tyra. "A very important day."

There was a hungry urgency in his

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kiss that frightened her. It was as if he knew he was begging her not to go and meet the man who had jilted her. Of course that was impossible, she told herself, even as he got back into his car and drove off without once looking back, leaving her there on her front porch.

LUCKILY, Aunt Bess wasn't home yet. Probably she was seeing to some last-minute wedding preparations, thought Tyra idly. Aunt Bess was enjoying every minute of this wedding. In her mind, It wiped out all the bitter humiliation of Brett's jilting of Tyra.

Tyra knew that Aunt Bess wouldn't worry. She'd think she had a late date with Kit.

She was walking rapidly down the quiet street as these thoughts flitted hastily across her mind. "I can get to Portersville and back, before anybody's the wiser I've got to go. It will ruin my marriage, if I don't go and see Brett again and find out what brought him back, just at this particular time."

The Portersville bus stopped three blocks away. She saw it coming and sprinted down the street and caught the bus, even before she had decided she was going.

She told herself wildly, "This is madness. Suppose Kit finds out! You're taking an awful chance with your future happiness, Tyra." But just the same, she had to go.

At the Portersville bus station she tried to get a cab. But a train just had come in and the only two taxis in Portersville were taking passengers to the three hotels in town.

She thought, "Frampton Village and Portersville are just ten miles apart. But somehow Portersville just isn't one of the places Frampton Village people go. In the other direction is the City and somehow we always go there for a good time or a show or a dinner."

She didn't know anybody in Portersville which was a mill town really, built around the knitting mills in the center of everything. She asked in a candy store where Ivy Street was, and the girl behind the counter raised carefully-plucked eyebrows and said, "South. It's sort of deserted out there. Was going to be a new real estate development years ago, but somehow not more than a few houses got built. Are you sure Ivy Street is where you want to go?"

Feeling very uncomfortable indeed, Tyra said yes, that was where she wanted to go. The girl gave her further directions and she went out and walked along nervously. Finally she found Ivy Street. The girl hadn't exaggerated at all. It was on the fringe of town and it was one of the dreariest spots Tyra ever had seen.

She thought, "I'd better go back home, while there's still time," and she did turn around and she was going to walk toward the bus station. But suddenly all at once, there was Brett standing in front of her under the one street lamp the down-at-the-heels section boasted.

Brett!

The light glinted down on his bare head with its crisp red-brown hair. He wasn't quite as tall as she had remembered him. But he certainly was just as dynamic. He whispered huskily, "Tyra! Oh Tyra, my darling!" He swept her into his arms for a tumultuous kiss which banished conscious thought and sent her senses spinning.

THINGS GOT sort of blurred from then on, till she found herself in a dingy room in a very grim-appearing house. That shabby room woke her out of her daze. She looked around with distaste at the dusty, grimy place.

He said carelessly, "It is sort of grim, isn't it, darling? But it was all I could get when I came here last year. The housing shortage is tough everywhere, you know."

"Last year!" she repeated, shocked into realities. "But—surely you haven't been just—ten miles away from me for—a whole year?" Her voice sounded horrified.

He swept her into his arms again for one of those breath-taking kisses

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which took her up to heaven to toss stars about and make faces at the man-in-the-moon.

Only this time, the kiss didn't quite come off. Some of the magic was gone. Maybe because Tyra didn't cooperate so thoroughly.

Unbidden came the thought "Brett always did kiss me into forgetting unpleasant questions I wanted answered. A kiss and love-making was Brett's way of settling everything. Only, three years ago, I didn't realize that fact."

She freed herself from his embrace, breathing rather fast. She said huskily, "You said, over the phone that it was very important that I meet you. That it was a matter of life and death!"

He said, smiling his old cocky smile, "Sure I meant just that. Your life, darling. I couldn't let you marry anybody else. Why, we belong together, angel. You know that, as well as I do!"

She gasped, eluding his grasp, when he would have pulled her to him again, "You—jilted me! You left me, practically at the very altar. You went off without one single word of farewell!"

Her voice broke treacherously on the last word and she found out that all the bitter hurt she had thought forgotten, was just beneath the surface, ready to pounce on her heart and twist hard and cruelly.

His handsome face sobered. "I know, Pet. It was a lowdown trick to pull on you. But look at it from my viewpoint, Sweet. Your uncle and aunt both hated me. They always were waiting for me to step out of line, so they could pounce.

"It never would have happened, if your uncle had loaned me that thousand I wanted, to start a radio shop. He had the money. Plenty of it. But he was so doggoned stingy!" He shrugged a little, and his amber eyes were shadowed with remembrance. "So I took the bonds, darling. I knew your uncle would make them good."

He stopped, warned by the look of horror on her face.

(Continued On Page 90)

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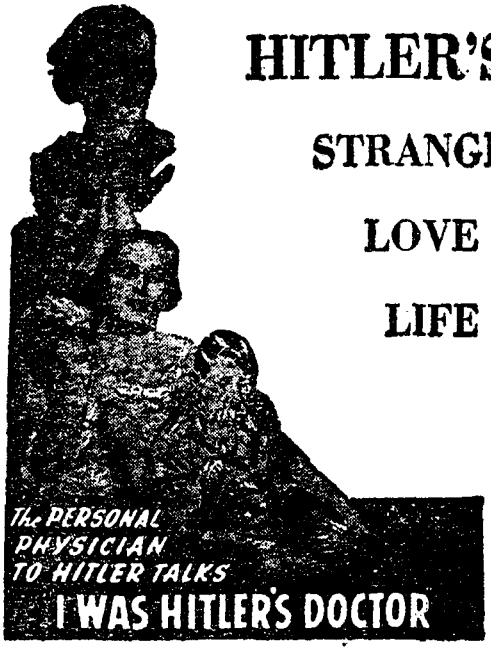

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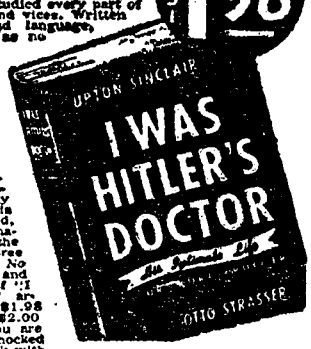

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IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 89)

"You—*stole* them?" she whispered brokenly.

"No. Of course not," he told her angrily. "I just took them for a while. To get me started in a business. The world owed me that! But your uncle made such a squawk when he found out, that there was nothing for it, but to blow town."

She looked at him in utter horror. "With the bonds?"

"Of course. What do you take me for? An utter dope? I'd paid pretty high for those bonds. I'd given you up. So I certainly was entitled to them!" He sounded like a sulky baby, justifying himself.

She thought, "This is the man I thought I loved. This is the man who could whistle me to heel after three long years, just by a word over the telephone. This!"

SHE UNDERSTOOD now. Her uncle had made good his theft. On condition that he stay away from Tyra. And he had stayed away. Not because he was a man of his word. But because he had been afraid of her uncle. Now her uncle was dead, he no longer was afraid.

And he had known her uncle had gone, before he rang her. His voice wasn't even surprised when she told him. Somebody had been telling him things all along. Somebody who knew Tyra was going to be married on the morrow.

She asked crisply, "Who told you about me, Brett? How did you know Uncle Luke was dead? How did you know I was being married tomorrow?"

"Ah, but you are not being married tomorrow," he told her, fondly, brushing aside her questions as unimportant just as he always had done. "Not unless you marry me, that is."

This time he did manage to get her in his arms and he held her hatefully close and set his lips on hers in a passionate kiss.

For a minute, it was like old times and she felt the wild magic ecstasy. Then suddenly, she thought of Kit and felt sick at heart.

Kit, who was charming and jolly

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and good-looking and—dear. Kit, who had taken her broken heart and made it as good as new again.

Better than new. Because it was a wiser, more loving heart when Kit's love had healed the hurt.

And this was the way she was repaying him!

Disgust of herself and of Brett, flooded over her. With her lips bruised and trembling from Brett's kiss, she stepped back. She said, as quietly as she could for the thunderous beating of her heart, "Listen to me, Brett, I made an awful mistake, coming here. I believed you when you said it was terribly important. I shouldn't have believed you. Because you always lie to women. Don't you?"

He didn't like that. His handsome face went more sulky then ever and his eyes glared angrily into hers. "But you did come!" he snapped at her— "And if you think for one instant that the goody-good you figure on marrying would have you, if he knew you were dating me in my room in a tumbledown old house on the edge of town, you've got another think coming! Men don't forgive any little indiscretions in the women they really love! So stop fighting this thing, Tyra. We belong together. We always have belonged together. From now on, it's you and me. It's got to be that way."

"No!" gasped Tyra explosively, stepping back.

SHE ONLY whetted his desire for her kiss by eluding him. He snapped, "Look. I'm going to play this on the up and up! I still love you, Tyra, I still want to marry you!"

"Why? Because Uncle Luke's money will be mine some day?" Tyra found out that she was shaking with her hatred of him. Now that she saw him in his real colors, she was sick at heart at herself, for ever having wasted a tear on him. She added bitterly, "It isn't as much as you think, Brett. I'm afraid you wouldn't be getting a good bargain."

"That little Flower Shop of yours is a sweet proposition," murmured Brett, his mood changing swiftly, as

(Continued On Page 92)

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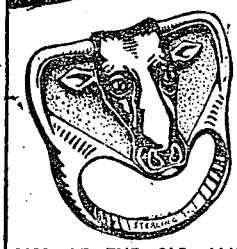

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IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 91)

it always had done in the past, if she had but remembered. "I'm in a position to know that the shop is all in your name. So I can move in and help you really run that flower shop into a good little paying business." He added, while she stared at him incredulously with big, horrified eyes. "And don't you worry about your almost-bridegroom, either! He'll have plenty of consolation from a very pretty little blonde!"

"Linna Watkins! All along, Linna has known you were in Portersville and she's been dating you. To tell you things about me." Tyra's voice was shrill.

"Don't get jealous, baby. Remember, I've only been back in this neck of the woods for a year! I went knocking around the country before that. But when I did come back, I contacted Linna to sort of sound out the ground and find out what gave with you." His eyes glowed as he looked at Tyra. "You see, I never could forget you, kitten! No matter how many other glamorous girls I knew, you were the only one I really went for in a big way."

"Linna!" repeated Tyra incredulously.

"As I said, baby, you needn't go getting jealous. She's strictly a one-man-dame. And the one man in her life is Kit Randall! She wants him and she means to have him. Just like I want you and I mean to have you, kitten!" He took a step toward her.

Tyra cried, "Don't come near me! Don't you see that I hate you, Brett! I can't stand the very sight of you. I. . ."

"Linna's told Kit by this time that you are dating me on the night before your own wedding! Do you think Kit is going to meekly forgive and forget? Not much he won't. No man would. No, darling. You killed your chances with Kit when you came to meet me. And you proved to me that no matter what you say, you do love me! I'm Head Man with you, baby. And don't try to tell your heart different." His arms went round her, hard and unyielding.

Drawing little sobbing breaths of

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horror, she tried to dodge his kiss. But it was no use. He kissed her and kissed her till she thought her heart would stop beating for sheer horror Finally, he let her go. "See?" You belong to me!" he said raggedly. "That's my brand I've set on your lips."

He went over to the far side of the room and pulled aside a black gauze curtain she hadn't noticed at all. Behind that was a camera. And smiling maliciously at Tyra was Linna Watkins!

Linna said, "I got three wonderful pictures, Brett. It was a smart stunt to have this camera set up and ready. Because Brett refused to come and spy on his bride-to-be. I told the fool!" Her pretty face twisted with anger; "I tipped him off at the wedding rehearsal. But he refused to believe me!"

THAT EXPLAINED why Kit had seemed to be almost a stranger, when they were driving home from the wedding rehearsal!

How long ago that seemed! At least a couple of years. Yet in reality it was just a couple of hours.

"He'll believe the camera's evidence, however!" went on Linna spitefully. "Then there won't be any wedding tomorrow! I've always wanted Kit for myself and I've tried every way I knew, to get him. But he played hard to get, all along the line. But now I'll win out. He'll be so furious with you, he'll take me on the rebound."

Sickened and horrified, Tyra made a dash for the door. Brett grabbed for her, but Linna was in the way and they collided. In the resulting excitement, Tyra darted out of the room and down the dusty stairs she didn't remember climbing with Brett.

She had her first bit of luck, right then. Down the street was a taxi, letting a passenger out at one of the other forlorn houses in the district which had been such a failure as a real estate scheme. Tyra cried, "Taxi! Taxi!" and was in the cab and being driven off fast by the time Brett reached the street.

(Continued On Page 94)

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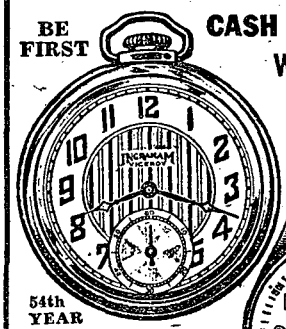
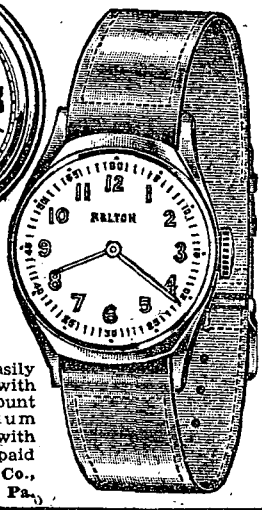
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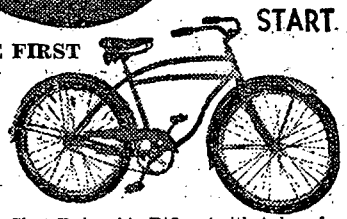
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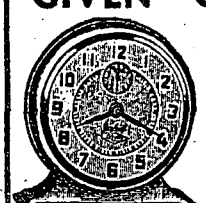

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IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 98)

The ride home on the bus seemingly took forever. She kept wiping her lips with her handkerchief, furtively, in the endeavor to blot out the memory of Brett's hateful kisses. It was no use. They were the sort of kisses which would not wipe off. She shivered with shame that she been such a credulous idiot as to meet a man who had cravenly jilted her, and so endanger her marriage to a fine man.

She thought, "If only I get a second chance! I'll make Kit such a wonderful wife!" But she knew, even as the thought crossed her mind, that it was a vain wish.

Linna wanted Kit for herself. She would stop at nothing to get him. So she would show Kit those horrible pictures. Tyra was wearing the crimson rose corsage that Kit had created especially for the wedding rehearsal. It was arranged in a sort of circlet. A replica of a wedding ring, done in crimson roses! That corsage would stamp the picture as authentic and prove that she had gone to see her former flame the very night before her wedding!

Mrs. Watkins was such a gossip! She would help spread the tidings everywhere!

Tyra thought glumly, "If only Uncle Luke hadn't gotten mad at an overcharge and had our telephone taken out! Then we never would have become so chummy with the Watkins family, and I never would have suggested taking Linna on at the Flower Shop as a clerk!"

The bus reached Frampton Village and Tyra ran toward her home. Never had anything ever looked so good to her as the two-story white frame building. Just the light Aunt Bess always left on, down-stairs was shining out. Sobbing with thankfulness that she wouldn't have to face her aunt's questions at this point, Tyra got the front door key from under the flowerpot and went into the house and up the stairs to her bedroom. She undressed in the dark and took a shower, trying to wash away her feeling of having touched pitch by letting Brett kiss her.

She got into bed and lay there

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rigidly while eddies of horror swept over her body. For the second time, she was going to be jilted. But this time, it would be a million times worse. This time, it was all her own fault, And this time she was losing her true love instead of a sordid Make Believe.

SHE WOKE from a troubled sleep, to find Aunt Bess in the room, pulling up the window shades and bustling about importantly.

For an instant, Tyra lay still, half-awake and half-asleep, but realizing, even before she was fully awake, that something horrible would pounce at her the minute full wakefulness came. She fought waking up. It was no use. She did wake. And remembered everything.

Aunt Bess cried archly, "Happy is the bride the sun shines on! Tyra. it is such a beautiful day for your wedding!"

Such a beautiful day.

If only there hadn't been an ugly sordid room on Ivy Street and a foolish girl who thought she was in love with a Dream!

In sort of daze she went around getting ready for her wedding. The wedding which wouldn't take place. Aunt Bess said, chattily when she came back after Tyra had taken her shower and was helping her get into the fragile white beautiful underthings made by Aunt Bess and Tyra herself, "Kit rang up a while ago. Honestly, Tyra, sometimes I sort of wish I hadn't paid any attention to that promise I gave your Uncle Luke not to put in a telephone! It's such a nuisance to take all our calls at Mrs. Watkin's house!"

"What did Kit say?" almost screamed Tyra.

"Oh, nothing much, darling. Just that he was sending your bridal bouquet from the shop and that it was going to be Sweetheart roses and lupins. And that you weren't to be late getting to the church because he was a very nervous bridegroom!" Aunt Bess giggled.

"Linna has told him all right," thought Tyra limply. "In the florists' chart of flowers, lupin are listed as

(Continued On Page 96)

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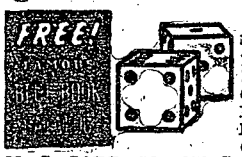

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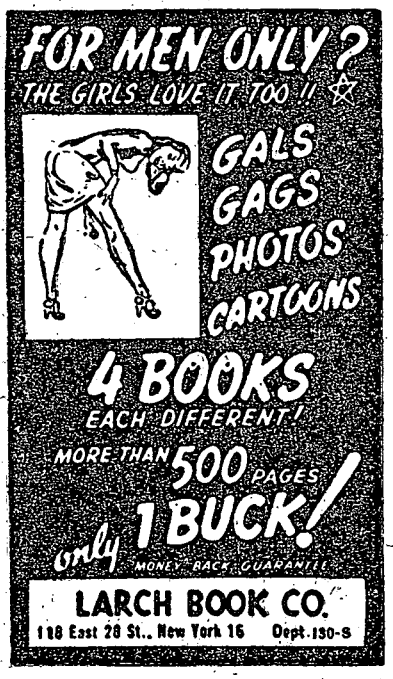

IDEAL LOVE

(Continued From Page 95)

"wilting easily." That means my variety of love, of course. Sweetheart roses! And "Wilt Easies!'" She felt almost faint.

Somehow or other she drank some coffee. Somehow or other she let her aunt get her into the beautiful wedding dress which Tyra loved so much. If there had been a phone in the house, she would have rung up Kit and tried to plead with him to understand. But it was close to noon and the wedding hour. There was no time for the bride to escape her bridesmaid's and Aunt Bess!

Everybody um-ed and ah-ed in admiration when the wedding dress was donned. Tyra looked into the mirror and was astonished to see that heartbreak did not show on the outside. She was a lovely bride and a beautiful girl. Her eyes were big and anxious and her mouth quivered wistfully. But that was put down as simply nervousness on the part of the bride. And very proper, too.

Linna didn't appear.

Mrs. Watkins, helping downstairs with the wedding breakfast, got terribly nervous. She darted in to say, "I declare I don't know what I'm going to do with that girl of mine. She never seems to know the value of time. She went off early this morning. Said she had to match some material for her bridesmaid's dress. She'll be late if she doesn't hurry!"

Tyra thought, "Don't fret yourself so, Mrs. Watkins! Your charming Linna is the only one who *knows* there isn't going to be a wedding! So why should she hurry to get ready?"

HOWEVER, to Tyra's astonishment Linna did appear, just as the rest of the bridesmaids were beginning to get terribly excited over her non-appearance. She didn't come upstairs. There wasn't time for that. The bridesmaids just piled into their cars and were whirled.

Linna's bridesmaid, fluffy, sky-blue, maline hat and muff matched the rest. But her dress, instead of being pink as they had planned, was white! Thus violating all the traditions that only the bride herself could appear in a white gown.

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I'LL MARRY YOU TOMORROW

Tyra thought, "She's going to take over my wedding! She's going to marry Kit!"

The next instant she knew how impossible that was. There'd have to be a license and everything.

Still, Tyra was shaking when the bridal bouquet arrived from the shop at the eleventh instant, just as everybody was about going crazy.

Tyra knew that Kit himself had made the bridal bouquet. She took it out of the box with hands that trembled. She caught her breath when she looked at it. The bouquet was beautiful. Blue lupin. Pink sweetheart roses. Lilies of the valley. Tiny white babies' breath, and fragile fern, all tied with huge white satin ribbons with long ends.

There was something tucked in the center of the bouquet. Despite the fact that everybody was urging her wildly to hurry or she would be late, she bent and looked closely at the dark little sprig stuck in the center of the bouquet. Heather. It was heather for luck!

Her eyes misted with tears, she got into the car with Mr. Norwood who had been her Uncle's closest friend and who was to escort her up the aisle at the church.

Mr. Norwood tried to talk but Tyra just answered at random. Maybe Linna was showing Kit those awful pictures now! Maybe she had waited till the last minute to do her deadly work, to be sure Tyra got jilted publicly at the very church this time!

Things went on being a blur for Tyra.

The organ pealed the Wedding March majestically. Tyra started out on that long, long walk which would end in disaster for her— She couldn't see anything for the tears glazing her eyes. She kept her gaze down and faintly she heard whispering voices say, "So lovely!" "So shy and bride-like!" "A perfect bride."

She thought, "I know now how Marie Antoinette felt on her way to the scaffold. Because of course, Kit won't be there!"

But he was. Astonishingly he was there. But Freddie Crewes who was to have been best man, wasn't around.

(Continued On Page 98)

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Instead, it was Brett Wentworth who stood there, dressed impeccably in gray striped trousers and a cut away coat and all the rest of the correct garb for a bridegroom!

Tyra almost died.

She thought, "Is Kit going to force me to marry Brett?" and her heart stood still with horror.

Then she noticed that Brett's face wasn't quite as handsome as it had been, the night before. The barber had done a skillful job of patching him up, but definitely he had a black eye and there was a bruise on his jaw and a cut place on his forehead.

"Oh!" she gasped, almost inaudibly.

Her gaze flashed to Kit. He also showed small signs of wear and tear but he looked very, very happy. When he saw her looking at him, he winked, very rapidly but distinctly, straight at his bride-to-be!

THE WHOLE church buzzed with the excited whispers and Brett shifted from foot to foot looking acutely uncomfortable while the marriage ceremony went on.

Things kept on being a blur to Tyra.

Until she heard the fateful words, "I pronounce you man and wife," and felt Kit's kiss on her mouth blotting out all the memory of Brett's hateful kisses. Then she woke up.

Kit got her down the aisle and into the waiting, decorated car in about two seconds flat. Once they were alone, he kissed her warmly again and said, "There. That wipes out that louse's kisses!"

Tyra whispered, "You knew all the time, Kit?"

"Linna saw to it that the rumor reached my ears. I was just in time to see you racing out of that awful house as if scorpions pursued you."

"You went to Potersville?" gasped Tyra.

"I certainly did. And I cleaned up on Brett Wentworth, too!" said Kit happily, smiling at the memory.

"How did you get him to come to my wedding?" gasped Tyra.

"Theatened to call the cops and put both Brett and Linna behind bars for attempted blackmail," he chuckled. "They were so scared they promised to do anything. Even to marrying each other! I thought they'd make a good pair. So I scurried around and cut some red tape and got them married. Then I forced them to attend our wedding. So you'd be even with Brett for having walked out on you."

"Walking out on me was the luckiest things in the world for me," gasped Tyra. "I wouldn't be married to you now, if Brett hadn't jilted me.

"I don't know about that," said Kit slowly. "I think love like ours was meant to culminate in marriage. I figure somehow or other we'd have found each other and married, no matter what happened."

Tyra gasped, "But—Linna and Brett *married*! It's fantastic.!"

"No. They were two-of-a-kind. They liked each other plenty. Though they wouldn't admit it. They may make a go of marriage. They're cut off the same piece of cloth."

Tyra said slowly, "I did go and meet Brett, Kit. He said..."

"Who cares what Brett said?" whispered Kit. "It's you and I who count, from now on, darling. This bit of heather will see to it that our marriage is lucky darling."

"Oh, no," said Tyra, putting her lips against his in a long, passionate kiss. "This is what will make our marriage lucky, my husband."

He seemed to agree. For he kissed her again. A kiss which lasted till they drove up with a flourish in front of Tyra's house and the jubilant wedding party trooped out to greet them.

THE END

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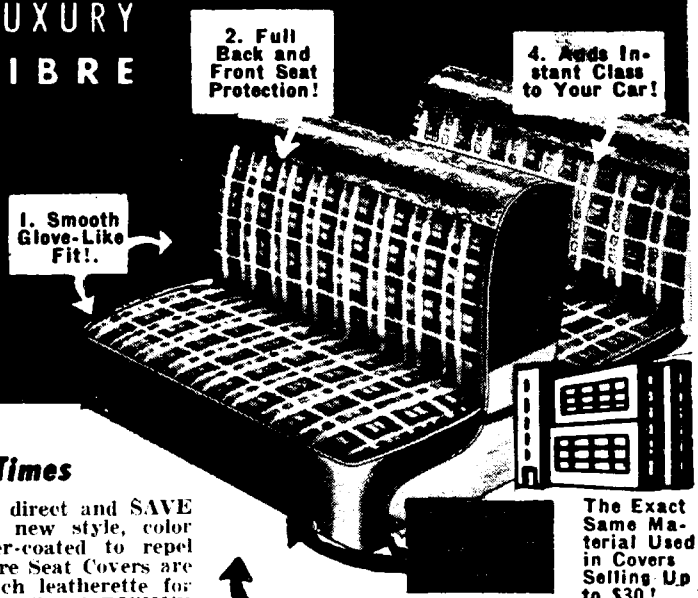

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